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The Cuban Missile Crisis: A First Cut

The “missiles of October” offer a set of fascinating puzzles for any analyst.¹ In October 1962, the governments of the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics came to the brink of war. For thirteen days, the United States and the Soviet Union stood “eyeball to eyeball,” each with the power of mutual annihilation in hand. Leaders in both governments understood that a war between their states could quickly involve the use of thermonuclear weapons by both powers, killing millions of people. A war that began in Cuba could prompt a Soviet siege of West Berlin, or a Soviet strike against missile bases in Turkey—thereby lighting other fuses that could soon lead to thermonuclear war. Armed conflict over Cuba would have altered the course of world history in ways we can only dimly imagine.

These abstract possibilities seem so distant now, or so horrific, that they may appear conjured from some fantastic story or movie. Yet they were real. Governments came to the hinge of war. Leaders accepted risks that they understood, and they unknowingly courted risks that they did not comprehend. Why? During the crisis, the United States was firm but forbearing. The Soviet Union looked hard, blinked twice, and then withdrew. Again, we look back and ask: Why?

In retrospect, this crisis proved a major watershed in the Cold War. Having peered over the edge of the nuclear precipice, both nations edged backward toward detente. Never again was the risk of war between them as great as it was during the last two weeks of October 1962. An understanding of this crisis is thus essential for every serious student of foreign affairs.

To understand how these superpowers moved to the brink of nuclear war, and, having got there, how they managed to retreat, it is necessary to answer three central questions. Why did the Soviet Union attempt to place offensive missiles in Cuba? Why did the United States choose to respond to the Soviet missile emplacement with a blockade



Nikita Khrushchev. Source: AP/Wide World Photos, Inc.

of Cuba? Why did the Soviet Union decide to withdraw the missiles? Fortunately, the availability of extensive evidence about the crisis, including tape recordings of most White House deliberations, makes it possible to reconstruct the calculations of both nations with some confidence.

WHY DID THE SOVIET UNION DECIDE TO PLACE OFFENSIVE MISSILES IN CUBA?

During the late summer of 1962, everyone knew that the Soviet Union was transporting large quantities of arms, and some troops, to bolster the defenses of Cuba against the danger of an American attack. The question arose whether these Soviet shipments might include nuclear weapons. Never before had Moscow stationed strategic nuclear weapons outside its own territorial borders—not in the Communist-controlled states of Eastern Europe that were satellites of the Soviet empire, and not even in China while that Communist-led country was a close ally of the Soviet Union.²

The Soviet government told its ambassador to Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin, to answer all queries with the assurance that only “defensive weapons” were being supplied. On September 4, Dobrynin privately conveyed this assurance to the president’s brother, Attorney

General Robert Kennedy. Reassured, the White House released a written statement later that day asserting that there was no evidence that the Soviets were putting bases or ballistic missiles into Cuba. “Were it to be otherwise, the gravest issues would arise.” Dobrynin repeated his assurance to another trusted adviser of the president, special counsel Theodore Sorensen, adding that nothing “new or extraordinary” was going on. Indeed, he had been specifically authorized by Khrushchev to tell the White House that “nothing will be undertaken before the American Congressional elections [in early November] that could complicate the international situation or aggravate the tension in the relations between our two countries.”³

One week later, on September 11, the Soviet government added a lengthy and definitive public statement about its activities in Cuba. While Moscow affirmed its commitment to Cuba and warned America not to attack either the island or the Soviet ships supplying it, it also repeated its policy on the transfer of nuclear weapons to third nations with the following announcement:

The Government of the Soviet Union authorized *Tass* to state that there is no need for the Soviet Union to shift its weapons for the repulsion of aggression, for a retaliatory blow, to any other country, for instance *Cuba*. Our nuclear weapons are so powerful in their explosive force and the Soviet Union has such powerful rockets to carry these nuclear warheads, that there is no need to search for sites for them beyond the boundaries of the Soviet Union.⁴

Such a formal, public declaration seemed to settle the matter. Naturally, all Soviet officials echoed this assurance in subsequent conversations with American officials. The Soviet signal was clear.

Nor was the American warning faint. Through public and private channels, the White House had warned the Soviet government that the United States would not tolerate offensive weapons in Cuba, and both sides understood that the Americans were defining ballistic missiles as “offensive” weapons. That point had been made clear both publicly, in the White House statement of September 4, and privately. The United States staked its public prestige on the warning. On September 7, Congress granted the president standby authority to call up additional reservists into the armed forces. On September 13, President Kennedy held a press conference and, for the first time, spoke directly to the American people about the Soviet buildup in Cuba. In effect, he accepted the assurance in the Soviet statement of September 11. He promised that he would not order an invasion of Cuba unless Cuba threatened other nations in Latin America or

became an offensive base for the Soviet Union. If, however, Cuba became an "offensive military base of significant capacity for the Soviet Union, then this country will do whatever must be done to protect its own security and that of its allies."⁵

Khrushchev certainly heard the warning. He complained angrily about it to Kennedy in a private letter sent on September 28. "I must tell you straightforwardly, Mr. President, that your statement with threats against Cuba is just an inconceivable step." Calling up reservists made "the atmosphere red-hot," and poured "oil in the flame." These threats against Cuba were like the behavior of brigands in the Middle Ages, Khrushchev wrote.⁶

Rhetoric aside, these moves and countermoves seem like a textbook case of responsible diplomacy. The United States formulated a policy stating precisely "what strategic transformations we [were] prepared to resist."⁷ The Soviet Union acknowledged these vital interests and announced a strategy that entailed no basic conflict. This would also seem to be a model case of communication, or signaling, between the superpowers. By private messages and public statements, the United States committed itself to action should the Soviets cross an unambiguous line (deploying offensive missiles in Cuba). All responses indicated that the Soviets understood the signal and accepted the message.⁸ The policy followed the tenets of deterrence espoused by the best scholars of the subject, then and now.⁹

The U.S. government nonetheless remained uneasy about Soviet intentions. The opposition Republicans, led by New York Senator Kenneth Keating, were making the Soviet buildup in Cuba the number one election issue in the upcoming congressional elections. Keating repeatedly voiced the fear that hostile nuclear weapons were being placed off America's shores. Inside the administration there was also a gadfly who suspected that the Soviets were lying about their real plans. He was the Director of CIA, John McCone. McCone had no hard evidence, but a deep intuition stimulated by the discovery of anti-aircraft missiles going into Cuba. For McCone, these made sense only if Moscow intended to use them to shield a base for ballistic missiles aimed at the United States.

Flowing from these warnings, promises, and assurances, U.S. expectations converged in an estimate prepared by the Office of National Estimates, the organization that prepared national estimates coordinating the views of intelligence analysts throughout the government. For ten years, that Office had been directed by "perhaps the foremost practitioner of the craft of analysis in American intelligence history": Sherman Kent.¹⁰ Kent's analysts produced an estimate that was dis-

tributed to top officials throughout the government on September 19. Entitled "The Military Buildup in Cuba," the estimate concluded that, yes, the Soviets could gain considerable military advantage from placing longer range ballistic missiles in Cuba or, more likely, establishing a base for missile-launching submarines there. "But either development would be incompatible with Soviet practice to date and with Soviet policy as we presently estimate it." Why? Because sending missiles to Cuba "would indicate a far greater willingness to increase the level of risk in U.S.-Soviet relations than the USSR has displayed thus far."¹¹

In an analysis of the episode published in the CIA's in-house journal in 1964, Kent argued that the analysts had tried to see the matter from the unique perspective of the Soviet government. In hundreds of cases, the method is reliable, Kent explained, because the "other man" is in his right mind, because he cannot capriciously make the decision by himself, because he knows the power of traditional forces in his country and generally accepted notions of its interests, and because the other man is well informed.¹² "It is when these constants do not rule that the real trouble begins," Kent explained. "It is when the other man zigs violently out of the track of 'normal' behavior that you are likely to lose him."¹³

When, on October 15-16, Kennedy and his advisers were informed that the United States had discovered Soviet ballistic missiles in Cuba, the president and most of the others were shocked. "It seems to me my press statement was so *clear* about how we *wouldn't* do anything under these conditions, and under the conditions that we *would*. He must know that we're going to find out. So it seems to me he just . . ." and then Kennedy's voice trailed off.¹⁴ What Kennedy's announcement of the crisis called "this secret, swift, and extraordinary build-up of Communist missiles" indeed posed troubling questions. Just why did the Soviet Union undertake such a reckless move? What objective could the Soviets have had that would have justified a course of action with such a high probability of nuclear confrontation? These questions were among the first to be considered by Kennedy's senior advisers when they convened at 11:50 A.M. on Tuesday, October 16. "We certainly have been wrong about what he's trying to do in Cuba," Kennedy admitted. "There isn't any doubt about that." At least four separate times during that first day, Kennedy wondered aloud why the Soviets had done it. "Well," he shrugged, "it's a goddamn mystery to me."¹⁵

Discussion at that and subsequent meetings generated four hypotheses. A careful examination of the details of Soviet action should allow us to distinguish among the hypotheses more clearly than the policy makers could in the heat of the crisis.



Fidel Castro. Source: AP/Wide World Photos, Inc.

Hypothesis 1: Cuban Defense

An analyst who knew nothing about the Soviet Union except that it was a powerful country and that one of its important allies, Cuba, feared attack by a large, threatening neighbor, might infer that the powerful country would come to the aid of its weak friend. One of the first memos the CIA produced after the missiles were discovered in Cuba explained: "The Soviet leaders' decision to deploy ballistic missiles to Cuba testifies to their determination to deter any active U.S. intervention to weaken or overthrow the Castro regime, which they apparently regard as likely and imminent."¹⁶ Though the 1961 effort to invade Cuba with a force of CIA-trained Cuban exiles had failed disastrously, the Soviet Union had substantial reason to believe that the United States might attempt to do the job right. The Bay of Pigs had demonstrated that the United States could act.

Certainly Khrushchev and other Soviet officials defended the deployment of Soviet arms to Cuba in 1962 in just these terms. After Kennedy revealed the missile deployment to the world, the Soviet reply emphasized that any Soviet aid to Cuba "is exclusively designed to improve Cuba's defensive capacity."¹⁷ That remained the Soviet position throughout the crisis. In his memoirs Khrushchev recalled, "While I was on an official visit to Bulgaria [between May 14–20, 1962], one thought kept hammering at my brain: What will happen if we lose Cuba?"¹⁸

From the Soviet point of view, Cuban defense was a serious matter. A self-proclaimed socialist state, Cuba stood out as the Communists' only showcase in the Western world. We now know, especially with the aid of a new book by Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, that Soviet-Cuban relations were deeper and much more complex than America realized. The Soviets had begun providing covert assistance to the Castro government as early as the spring of 1959, and secretly arranged the first sales of arms in the fall of 1959, well before such aid was detected by a United States government that was still deciding whether Castro would be a friend or foe.¹⁹

In June 1960, Castro thought his decision to nationalize American oil refineries (which had refused to refine Soviet crude oil) would cause an imminent American invasion. (The Americans had no such plan.) Khrushchev gave a speech indicating that the Soviet Union might launch a nuclear attack on America if Washington chose to invade Cuba. The speech had no effect on the nonexistent American plans, but it delighted the Cuban leaders, who thought the Russians had deterred an American attack.²⁰ There was another invasion scare in October 1960; Cuba feared attack from Cuban exiles being trained by the CIA in Guatemala. Such training was in fact taking place, but it would be months before the force would be ready to invade Cuba. The Soviet and Cuban governments nevertheless falsely believed an attack was imminent. Moscow again rattled its nuclear missiles. When the invasion did not come, the Cubans again believed the Soviet threats had deterred it. (In fact, the CIA then began operational planning for the invasion that the Cubans thought they had just deterred.) In early November 1960, Castro gave a private address among Cuban Communists saying that he had always been a Marxist, and pronouncing repeatedly that "Moscow is our brain and our great leader, and we must pay attention to its voice."²¹

The Cubans and Soviets were caught by surprise when the Cuban exiles really invaded at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961. Khrushchev offered all the support he could to Cuba and warned Kennedy that "any so-called 'little war' can touch off a chain reaction in all parts of the globe."²² Again, the Soviets took some credit for deterring Kennedy from giving the invasion the U.S. military support it would have required in order to succeed. The Americans had little or no grasp of what, to the Soviets and Cubans, seemed like a string of deterrent successes for Soviet missiles.

Khrushchev and the Soviet government believed that more and more of their own status was tied to Castro's survival. Cuba was the

prime example of success in the newly announced global strategy of undermining capitalism through wars of national liberation in the less developed world. Cuba's fate was becoming a test of Soviet power and global credibility. If Cuba was "lost," Khrushchev remarked, "I knew it would have been a terrible blow to Marxism-Leninism. It would gravely diminish our stature throughout the world, but especially in Latin America."²³ Khrushchev had already been severely challenged by the Chinese and by senior figures in his own government for reducing Soviet military preparedness and not taking a sufficiently revolutionary stance in foreign policy. Castro himself had voiced this criticism in February 1962, while he was calling for revolution throughout Latin America.²⁴

Soviet and Cuban beliefs about U.S. efforts against Cuba often bore only a coincidental relationship to what America was really doing. But certainly Soviet and Cuban intelligence would have found ample basis for suspicion. In November 1961, the U.S. authorized Operation Mongoose, a covert CIA-led plan to foment internal revolution in Cuba. Mongoose was supervised by an interagency group energetically chaired by Robert Kennedy. Various efforts to assassinate Castro had been undertaken at least since 1960, some with U.S. knowledge and support, some without.²⁵

Mongoose suffered, however, from a basic problem characteristic of many such covert operations. Though it could dispatch agents to Cuba and mount some low-level sabotage operations, most officials—including at CIA—thought an internal revolt would never succeed on its own. The rebels would have to be bailed out by a U.S. invasion. The U.S. military developed contingency plans for such an invasion. But, as of the spring of 1962, many of Kennedy's advisers (especially at the State Department and the White House) were not only opposed to an invasion, but were also opposed to fomenting any revolt so large that it might force the U.S. to consider an invasion. On the one occasion in the spring of 1962 when Kennedy plainly expressed his own view of the matter in a closely held April conversation with the leader of the Cuban exiles, Kennedy did not say what the exile leader wanted to hear. Echoing the views his national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, had conveyed a month earlier, Kennedy privately said he would *not* commit the United States to back up a revolt with American troops.²⁶

But meanwhile the covert Mongoose operation moved ahead, its advocates heartened by overt American denunciations of Cuba's revolutionary fervor. Trying to intimidate and isolate Castro, the U.S. led a January 1962 effort to persuade other Western Hemisphere



McGeorge Bundy. Source: UPI/Corbis-Bettmann.

countries in the Organization of American States to cut off their trade and diplomatic ties with Cuba. In February 1962, Khrushchev received new intelligence reports, again raising concerns about a possible American invasion of Cuba. The Soviets had some inkling that a reinvigorated American covert operation for low-level infiltration into Cuba and sabotage was underway. They also had information about the contingency planning to prepare American forces for a possible invasion. Khrushchev's son-in-law, the editor of *Pravda*, also reported on a lengthy private conversation with Kennedy, claiming that Kennedy had talked about an analogy between Cuba and the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956.²⁷

Khrushchev had developed a greater fear of an American invasion of Cuba than American officials realized, or would have thought warranted. Yet there is no evidence that Khrushchev thought the danger of an invasion was acute, or imminent. "I'm not saying we had any documentary proof that the Americans were preparing a second invasion; we didn't need documentary proof. We knew the class affiliation, the class blindness of the United States, and that was enough to make us expect the worst." Fursenko and Naftali note that "the Soviet intelligence community's failure to provide compelling evidence that a U.S. attack on Cuba was imminent allowed the policy process to grind to a crawl in Moscow."²⁸

Then in late March 1962 Soviet-Cuban relations entered a crisis, for reasons having little to do with Washington and only dimly understood there. For internal reasons, Castro had turned on the ambitious leader of the Cuban Communist party and loyal servant of Moscow, Anibal Escalante.²⁹ Meanwhile, Castro embarked on new talks about getting economic assistance from China. In early April, the Soviet government contemplated its options and decided to redouble its commitment to Castro.

For months, the Soviets had carefully developed a package of military aid. In February 1962, after the report from Khrushchev's son-in-law, the governing Presidium finally approved the costly, long-pending assistance package for Cuba. The Defense Ministry had recommended accelerating decision to deliver the SA-2 air defense missiles, making the big political judgment to divert to Cuba a shipment of the missiles that had previously been promised to Egypt. This request was considered in the aftermath of the Escalante affair and news of new U.S. military exercises in the Caribbean. On April 12, the Presidium confirmed the decision to deliver approximately 180 SA-2 missiles to Cuba and a battery of Soviet coastal defense cruise missiles, along with trainers and the deployment of a regiment of regular Soviet troops. A military mission was also dispatched to Cuba to survey additional needs.³⁰

If Cuban defense was the Soviet objective, the venture apparently succeeded. As the missile crisis ended, President Kennedy pledged that if Cuba did not threaten its neighbors, it would not be invaded by the U.S. or by any other nation in the Western Hemisphere. That pledge seemed to remove the threat the Soviet missiles were sent to deter. Therefore the missiles could be withdrawn.

Though persuasive, attempts to explain Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba with the Cuban defense hypothesis will not withstand careful examination. First, if deterrence of an American attack on Cuba had been the primary Soviet objective, there was no need to install ballistic missiles in Cuba. The equipment the Soviets were supplying to the Cuban Army certainly precluded an American attempt to destroy Castro discreetly—without a major attack. If deterrence of a major attack had been the objective, the presence of a sizeable contingent of Soviet troops would have been a better solution. As a deterrent, the value of Soviet troops in Cuba would be roughly equivalent to that of American troops in Berlin.

Second, the Soviets could have signed a public defense treaty with Cuba without deploying forces. A defense pact was drafted and initiated by Soviet defense minister Rodion Malinovsky and Castro's

senior aide, Che Guevara, and was to be signed triumphantly by Khrushchev in Cuba in November 1962, when the operational missiles were to be unveiled to the world. The signing ceremony never took place. When Guevara and another top Cuban official, Emilio Aragones, went to Moscow at the end of August to finalize the pact, they asked Khrushchev to publicize the preparation of the treaty and end the attempt to hide the nuclear missiles, hoping the treaty would suffice to deter America. The Cubans would then insist on their right to accept a Soviet base out in the open, just as America's allies (like Turkey) had done with their nuclear deployments. But Khrushchev said no.³¹

A third objection to the Cuban defense hypothesis centers on the nuclear question. If for some reason the Soviets believed a nuclear deterrent was necessary, tactical nuclear weapons (i.e., weapons with a range of less than 100 miles) were available that could have been emplaced more quickly, at less cost, and with considerably less likelihood of being discovered before they were ready. Indeed, Khrushchev made just such a decision to rush tactical nuclear weapons to Cuba, but only in September 1962, when Kennedy's public statements revived Khrushchev's real fear of a possible American invasion.

Fourth, if for some reason strategic-range missiles were thought necessary, a much smaller number of medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs, with a range of about 1,100 miles) would have sufficed, with none of the more expensive and more detectable intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs, with a range of about 2,200 miles). Nor would it have been necessary to turn Cuba into a base for submarine-launched ballistic missiles too.

Fifth and most important, what we now know about the timeline of Soviet decisions is inconsistent with the argument that Cuban defense explains the deployment of Soviet nuclear missiles. The Soviet government had already analyzed the American threat in dire terms, and had carefully chosen its response, culminating in the Presidium decision on April 12. That was Moscow's answer to Cuban defense. More than a month later, Khrushchev had initiated an entirely new process, culminating in a set of decisions taken on May 21 and 24, to send a far larger Group of Soviet Forces for deployment to Cuba, armed with many nuclear weapons. The U.S. held publicly announced military exercises in the Caribbean during April and May ("Lantphibex 1-62" and "Quick Kick"), which presumably were noticed by Soviet and Cuban military intelligence.³² So one action might have triggered a response. But there is no evidence that the exercises prompted relevant officials in Moscow to react, nor did Havana ask for radical reconsideration of the Presidium's April 12 decision on the military aid package for Cuba. The

Soviet military mission sent to Cuba did get new requests from Castro on May 18 for more coastal defense missiles and possibly more Soviet troops (though on this point Castro was a bit coy). But neither Castro nor the Soviet military delegation expressed any interest in nuclear weapons.³³

After all, as Castro himself put it, Cuba had "stated repeatedly that it has no intention to offer any part of its territory to any state for the establishment of military bases,"³⁴ in part knowing that such a move might both provoke and legitimize an American attack. When recalled to Moscow and asked his opinion during the deliberations, the Soviet envoy to Castro was sure, for these reasons, that Castro would not accept the missiles.³⁵

In the end, Castro did accept the missiles. But he and his colleagues always said that they did this only because they felt obliged to help the Soviet Union in its desire to change the global balance of power. Of course, having accepted the dangerous deployments, Castro and his colleagues could also hope that Cuba would be protected from attack. But Castro expected that the deployment would provoke an intense crisis. He was fatalistic about it, and says that he "ignored how many nuclear weapons the North Americans had. . . . We really trusted that they [the Soviets] were acting with the knowledge of the entire situation."³⁶ So a final problem with the Cuban defense hypothesis is that the move actually made Cuba's position more, not less, perilous, a point that was made in Moscow by Khrushchev's top expert on Cuba.

In support of the Cuban defense hypothesis, it is clear that Cuba was surely on Khrushchev's mind. He might have worried about the American exercises, even if his experts and Castro had not raised a great fuss, and even if he was not alarmed enough to write to Kennedy about the matter. Khrushchev's impulsive nature is evident. There is no evidence that Khrushchev analyzed options for Cuban defense carefully or systematically. Nor had his military experts. For the Soviet General Staff, Khrushchev's plan "was like a roll of thunder in a clear sky." The only options they had examined were authorized in the original, April decisions to defend Cuba with conventional arms.³⁷

Hypothesis 2: Cold War Politics

Weaknesses identified in probing the Cuban defense hypothesis can be addressed by locating this event in the context of a great power rivalry. The defining feature of the Cold War was the global competition between the U.S. and the values and interests it represented, on the one hand, and the Soviet Union's Communist agenda, on the other. Whenever one party lost, the other gained—and was seen to do so by others around the world. Without knowing many details about

the United States and the Soviet Union, an analyst would quickly understand that they were competing for global power. A rival might seize the opportunity to display the extent of its worldwide power, especially so near its enemy's shores.

Reacting to Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's initial assessment that the Soviet missiles in Cuba had little military significance, President Kennedy fell back on such a broad hypothesis of global politics. He had drawn a line, and they had flagrantly crossed it, showing a general defiance of U.S. power. "Last month," Kennedy speculated, "I said we weren't going to [allow it]. Last month I should have said that we don't care. But when we said we're *not* going to, and then they go ahead and do it, and then we do nothing, then I would think that our risks increase. . . . After all, this is a political struggle as much as military."³⁸

Intelligence experts around the government joined a few days later in estimating that, "A major Soviet objective in their military buildup in Cuba is to demonstrate that the world balance of forces has shifted so far in their favor that the U.S. can no longer prevent the advance of Soviet offensive power even into its own hemisphere." U.S. acquiescence would mean a loss of confidence in America throughout Latin America, and the world. Secretary of State Dean Rusk thought "there has been quite a debate going on in the Soviet Union about the course of action [in the global competition]. The peaceful coexistence theme was not getting them very far and I think the theme's clear now that the hard line boys have moved into the ascendancy. So one of the things that we have to be concerned about is not just the missiles, but the entire development of Soviet policy as it affects our situation around the globe."³⁹

In 1962, American leaders saw the Cold War as a long-term struggle for global preeminence. Kennedy's decision to let the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba fail was widely interpreted as showing a lack of will, and Khrushchev had tried to push the American leader around at their only face-to-face meeting in Vienna in June 1961. "In a general sense," Kennedy aide and historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., wrote later, Khrushchev's dispatch of nuclear missiles to Cuba "obviously represented the supreme Soviet probe of American intentions."⁴⁰ Undertaken in secrecy and sustained by duplicity, the success of Khrushchev's plan required a *fait accompli*. Confronted with operational missiles, the United States might react indecisively. Diplomatic protests would just advertise Washington's weakness, and the hollowness of Kennedy's own threats. By unmasking an irresolute America, the Soviet Union would drastically reduce the credibility of U.S. commitments to other nations. After the failure to act on Cuba, who could

expect the United States to act elsewhere? Though obviously risky, a victory would demonstrate that the tide in the Cold War had turned.

It is difficult today to recapture just how pessimistic many Americans were about the likely outcome of the Cold War. Just before Kennedy took office, Henry Kissinger—then a professor at Harvard—wrote that “the United States cannot afford another decline like that which has characterized the past decade and a half.” More such deterioration “would find us reduced to Fortress America in a world in which we had become largely irrelevant.”⁴¹

Kennedy felt such global stakes. On October 21, when Schlesinger asked Kennedy why the Soviets had put missiles in Cuba, Kennedy pointed to the potential Soviet political gains in (1) drawing Russia and China closer together again, helping to heal a split that had been visibly widening since 1959, or at least strengthening the Soviet position in the Communist world by showing that Moscow was capable of bold action in support of a Communist revolution; (2) radically redefining the setting in which the Berlin problem could be reopened after the American congressional elections in November; and (3) dealing the United States a tremendous political blow.⁴²

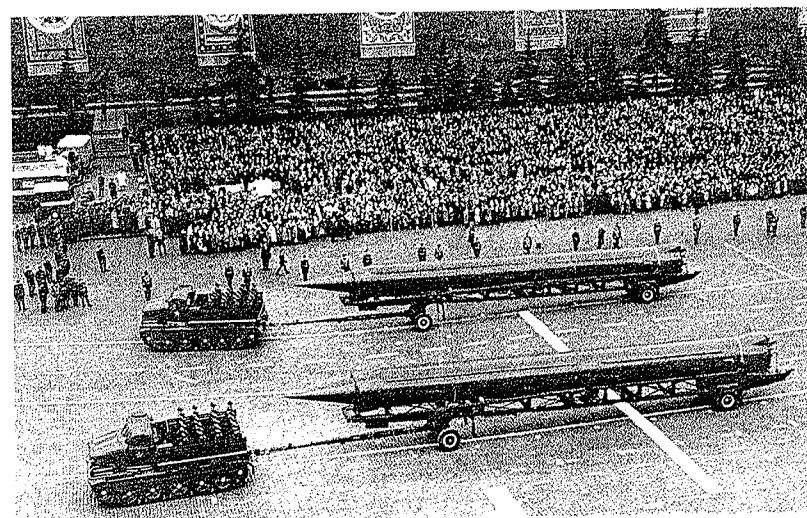
In spite of the persuasiveness of these arguments, this hypothesis ignores five key aspects of the situation.

First, as Robert McNamara wondered publicly on several occasions, why did the Soviet Union need to probe the firmness of American intentions any further after the strong American stand on Berlin in 1961? Why another test?

Second, the size and character of the Soviet weapon deployment were well beyond what was needed for a mere political probe. To challenge American intentions and firmness, even a few MRBMs, threatening the entire southeastern United States (including Washington) should suffice. What could the IRBMs possibly add to the achievement of this objective, or the planned deployment of submarine-launched ballistic missiles?

Third, the deployment of MRBMs, IRBMs, and plans for a nuclear submarine base jeopardized the essential requirement for a successful move on the Cold War chessboard: namely, that it be a *fait accompli*. A smaller, tailored nuclear deployment that became operational before it was discovered could indeed have given the Soviet Union a Cuban enclave no less defensible than the Western enclave in Berlin. But the specific features of the deployment undermined this objective.

Fourth, why launch such a provocative probe of American intentions at that moment, in the autumn of 1962? Granted, America



Soviet SS-4 medium range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) being paraded through Red Square. These were the first type of nuclear ballistic missiles deployed and discovered in Cuba. Source: Itar-Tass/Sovfoto.

might be humbled. But was there some particular reason to try and humble the Americans at that particular time? What tangible gains could justify the risks?

Finally, why choose Cuba as the location of the probe? At no point on the globe outside the continental United States were the Soviets so militarily disadvantaged vis-à-vis the United States as in the Caribbean. If the Soviet probe provoked a forceful American riposte, a vivid Soviet defeat would make the whole venture counterproductive. Moscow would then be the big loser, not Washington.

Hypothesis 3: Missile Power

At the first meeting with his advisers, on the morning of October 16, the very first speculation about Soviet motives came from President Kennedy. He pointed to the strategic balance of power. “Must be some major reason for the Russians to set this up,” he mused. “Must be that they’re not satisfied with their ICBMs.” The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Maxwell Taylor, thought Kennedy’s guess was on target.⁴³

Knowing nothing about the government of the Soviet Union, or its leaders, an analyst could have gotten quite far by examining objective facts. Imagine a strategic analyst from Mars who could read newspa-

pers and observe the military forces deployed and being developed by the two sides. Starting only with the presumption that the goals of each state included survival and avoidance of extreme coercion by the other, and objective facts about current and projected strategic nuclear forces of each, this analyst would have put higher odds on the Soviet player's moving missiles to Cuba than did Sherman Kent's Office of National Estimates. Objectively, the Soviet Union faced a serious and widening "window of vulnerability"—to borrow a phrase that the Committee on the Present Danger made vivid in describing the threat to the U.S. in the American politics of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Specifically, the Soviet Union faced circumstances in 1962 in which the U.S. might have had, or might have believed it had, a "splendid first strike" capability against the Soviet Union. As described by Herman Kahn in his best-selling 1960 analysis, *On Thermonuclear War*, a splendid first strike capability exists when State A can, by striking first, destroy State B's capability to retaliate against State A's homeland.⁴⁴

First, consider the brute facts. For a combination of technical and budgetary reasons, the Soviet government found itself in 1962 with only 20 ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missiles with ranges of more than 5,000 miles) capable of launching nuclear warheads that could reach American territory from bases inside the Soviet Union. About these missiles' technical reliability and accuracy, they had well-founded doubts. A successor generation of ICBMs would not become operational before 1964. In addition, Soviet strategic forces included only about six submarines with submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). The only strategic nuclear submarine base for Soviet submarines was in the northern Kola Peninsula, 7,000 miles from U.S. shores. Since the relatively crude early missiles deployed by these submarines had a range of less than 600 miles, Soviet SLBM forces could not maintain regular patrols in areas from which their weapons could be launched against the U.S. Moreover, the long route to the launch area created significant vulnerabilities to detection and destruction by U.S. anti-submarine forces (as was demonstrated when submarines actually moved into the Atlantic during the Cuban missile crisis). The Soviet Union's best hope for threatening the U.S. homeland was its fleet of approximately 200 long range bombers. Though U.S. air defense capabilities were ragged, even here a cautious planner would worry. Because of their range, the absence of forward bases from which they could be launched, and the lack of a capacity to refuel aircraft en route, bombers launched against the U.S. would be sent on a

mission with little or no possibility of returning home, and could be plausibly intercepted by U.S. air defenses at various points along a 7,000 mile route.

The bulk of the Soviet nuclear capability consisted not of long range nuclear threats to the U.S., but rather of the medium and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs and IRBMs). These missiles worked well and had been produced in the hundreds. From the Soviet homeland they could hit American allies, but not America (a fact that had framed strategic debates in Western Europe about the need for their own nuclear forces). There were also shorter range bombers carrying nuclear bombs, but again they could only strike America's allies.

With these assets, in 1962, Soviet leaders confronted a U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal of at least 180 ICBMs, 12 Polaris submarines (each carrying 12 missiles), and 630 strategic bombers stationed not only in the U.S., but also in Europe and Asia, from which they could attack Soviet targets from all azimuths. The bomber force was well trained and kept at high readiness. The Polaris submarines could constantly patrol within range of their Soviet targets. Moreover, the Kennedy administration had announced in February 1961 that one of its major initiatives would be to *increase* rapidly American strategic nuclear forces, to triple the ICBM force and double the SLBM force by 1964. In addition, as a counter to Soviet shorter and intermediate range nuclear threats to Europe and Asia, the U.S. and NATO maintained hundreds of nuclear-armed aircraft at bases in Europe and Asia and had deployed early, now obsolescent, Thor and Jupiter IRBMs in Great Britain, Italy, and Turkey. The Jupiter deployment was scheduled for completion in the spring of 1962.

To a detached analyst—American, Soviet, or Martian—the consequences of such a strategic balance were calculable and chilling. Strategic nuclear war planners distinguish between "first strike" and "second strike" scenarios in terms of who attacks first. With the strategic nuclear capabilities each had in 1962, and would have in 1963, rational Soviet planners could never have an incentive to strike first, but what about rational U.S. planners? Could they hope by a pre-emptive attack to destroy and disable altogether the Soviet capacity to respond against the U.S.? The horrific consequences of such an act that willfully destroyed tens of millions of Soviet citizens, as well as irreducible uncertainties about whether such a first strike could prove 100 percent effective, made any such decision highly unlikely—even when one side had significant strategic superiority.

But war planners must consider extreme cases. What about a case in which leaders judged nuclear war likely, or indeed inevitable? Then, to a theoretic American leader, the gains of striking first might seem immense—the difference between 10 million dead or 100 million dead. Add yet another fact, well-known in 1962. American strategy and operational plans for defense of Berlin (a land locked outpost surrounded by Soviet Forces in East Germany) called for initiation of nuclear war if the Soviet Union used its greater conventional military power to cut off or seize Berlin.⁴⁵

Moving beyond brute facts to review prevailing beliefs among strategic thinkers and political leaders, an analyst would note a common perception that bargaining advantages accrued to a state that had a strategic nuclear advantage. In 1962, governments believed: size matters. Significant strategic nuclear advantages conveyed significant bargaining advantages, especially in crisis, because each side knew that the other knew that the advantaged party could force events up the escalation ladder to a level at which its advantages counted.⁴⁶ Moreover, it was a well known “truth” in 1962 that the state with significant strategic nuclear advantages would likely be emboldened to pursue its interests more aggressively, and be less likely to back down.

Third, the detached analyst could note the symbolic importance of strategic nuclear weapons in the politics of nations and states: international, domestic, and bureaucratic. Strategic nuclear weapons were seen as the highest trump card, the ticket into the most exclusive club in the world, that of the nuclear powers. Great numbers of nuclear weapons defined the “super powers.” The Soviet Union’s launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957 made them first in space and became a source of pride for Soviet leaders. It also galvanized the challenge for Americans in a race for both space and military uses of missiles. Soviet leaders touted their strategic nuclear advantage, asserting an ability to “turn out missiles like sausages.” In response, John Kennedy had made the “missile gap” a key issue in his 1960 campaign against Richard Nixon, castigating the Republicans for allowing the Soviets to achieve a significant advantage over the U.S. Upon becoming president, Kennedy and his secretary of defense announced a massive build-up of the American strategic nuclear arsenal, including a rapid ramp-up of the new Minuteman ICBMs, and the Polaris SLBMs.

In sum, a clear-eyed strategic analyst, Martian, Soviet, or American, could quite reasonably conclude in 1962 that the Soviet Union had a problem, a large problem. Over several years, the Soviet Union could right the nuclear imbalance by deploying new ICBMs on its own soil.

But to meet the threat it faced in 1962, 1963, and 1964, it had few options. Moving existing nuclear weapons to locations from which they could reach American targets was one.

With more specific information about Soviet leaders, an analyst would have even stronger grounds on which to conclude that the Soviet government was concerned. Khrushchev focused on missiles obsessively as an index of his country’s military power, and for years had claimed to have more of them than he really had.⁴⁷

American knowledge of actual Soviet military developments had been transformed by the high-flying U-2 surveillance aircraft in 1956 and then, after one of these was shot down and flights directly over the Soviet homeland were suspended, by the CORONA program which began using satellites to photograph Soviet territory from space in the summer of 1961. The first imagery from the satellite provided more coverage of a greater area than had all the previous U-2 flights combined. Though it showed the Soviets hard at work on new ICBMs, it provided convincing evidence that their existing ICBM arsenal was tiny. The evidence was confirmed by reports from a well-connected senior Soviet officer, Colonel Oleg Penkovsky, who was a spy for American intelligence.⁴⁸

Outsiders did not know all this. But they did know that in October 1961, the Kennedy administration picked Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric to give a public speech that would let Khrushchev know that Washington knew about the real weakness of Soviet inter-continental striking power. “In short,” Gilpatric concluded, American forces were so powerful that, even after absorbing a full-scale Soviet attack “we have a second-strike capability which is at least as extensive as what the Soviets can deliver by striking first. Therefore, we are confident that the Soviets will not provoke a major nuclear conflict.”⁴⁹

Alone among Kennedy’s top advisers, John McCone, director of the CIA, foresaw the missile deployment and went on the (then secret) record saying so. He had a “hunch,” based less on the abstract calculus above and more on the size and character of Soviet arms supplied to Cuba. Most telling to him were the most modern surface-to-air anti-aircraft missiles (SAMs). “Difficult for me to rationalize extensive costly defenses being established in Cuba,” he argued, unless “MRBMs to be installed by Soviets after present phase completed and country secured from [U-2] overflights.”⁵⁰

Professional analysts at CIA, and others in the government, did not agree with McCone’s hypothesis. There were three objections. First, some believed that the Soviets would not see any military advantage in deploying missiles to Cuba. Asked on the first evening of

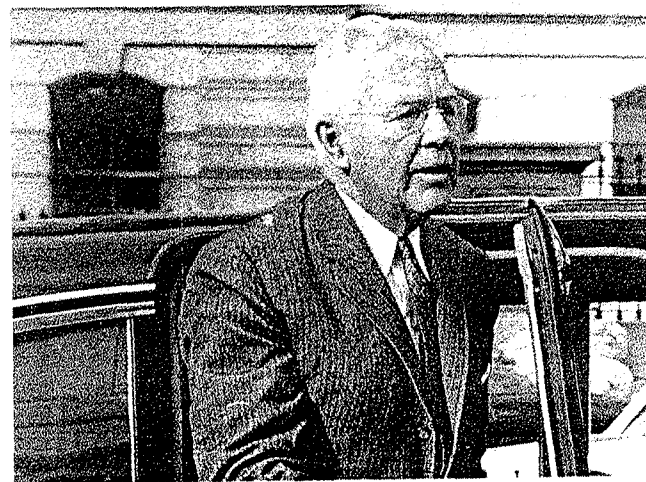
deliberations, October 16, how much the Soviet deployment changed the strategic balance, Robert McNamara replied that, "I asked the [Joint] Chiefs [of Staff] that this afternoon, in effect. And they said: Substantially. My own personal view is: Not at all." McNamara's opinion carried a good deal of weight with Kennedy, forcing Kennedy to reconsider his initial supposition that focused on ICBM strength. But McNamara's was a minority view. National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy commented later in the same meeting, echoing State Department officials, that: "I'm sure his [Khrushchev's] generals have been telling him for a year and a half that he was missing a golden strategic opportunity to add to his strategic capability."⁵¹

As the full size of the Soviet deployment became apparent in the next few days, disagreement over its military significance faded from view. The missile power hypothesis was supported by lower-level experts across the U.S. government. They noted that the ability to launch 40 missiles against the United States from Cuba (with a reload capability to fire more) would increase Soviet missile striking power against the United States by at least 50 percent. More accurately than he knew, Dean Rusk later explained to other members of the National Security Council that a deployment "of this magnitude is not something that we can brush aside, simply because the Soviets have some other missiles that can also reach the United States. The fact is that... the number of missiles that launch in these sites would double the known missile strength the Soviet Union has to reach this country."⁵²

But there was a second objection. The estimate by Sherman Kent and his interagency panel of intelligence analysts had conceded the military significance of the missiles. They just did not believe that a sensible Soviet government would accept the extraordinary risk such a venture entailed. Specifically, the initiative's success depended on effecting a *fait accompli* without discovery.

Third, McCone's hunch did not give adequate attention to the "Cuban defense" hypothesis. The SAM deployments that McCone found so significant were authorized by the original April Presidium decisions—decisions made to assist Cuba in defending itself, prior to any consideration of nuclear missiles. Thus the behavior he observed, and his chain of inference, could have been wrong.

We now know that Khrushchev first asked key advisers about the idea of deploying ballistic missiles to Cuba a week or two after the April decisions on defensive aid to Cuba. One adviser with whom he discussed this was Defense Minister Rodion Malinovsky.⁵³ After hearing Malinovsky's gloomy report on the development of Soviet ICBMs



John McCone. Source: UPI/Corbis-Bettmann.

able to reach America from Russia, Khrushchev suggested the shortcut of deploying MRBMs and/or IRBMs to Cuba. "Why not throw a hedgehog at Uncle Sam's pants?"⁵⁴

Thus from Khrushchev's perspective: "You [Americans] had such a thing as a position of strength, and our inferior position was impossible to us."⁵⁵ Moreover, in reconstructing the timeline of decisions, it is essential to note what else was happening at this time. In March and April 1962, one aspect of the nuclear standoff that certainly engaged Khrushchev's full attention was an intense set of negotiations, centered in Geneva, about the possibility of banning further test explosions of nuclear weapons. The talks failed. The U.S. then proceeded with a series of test blasts in the Pacific. The Soviets saw the renewed American testing not only as a way of further improving America's nuclear arsenal, but also of advertising America's advantage. It was at this time that Khrushchev began privately exploring the idea of deploying missiles to Cuba.⁵⁶

To these weighty considerations an ironic coincidence in timing almost seems an aside. The long-delayed deployment of 15 Jupiter intermediate-range ballistic missiles at five launch sites in Turkey was finally reaching completion. The first of the five launch sites was set up in November 1961, the last in March 1962. The Soviets had known about the planned deployment for several years, and probably knew that the last of the missiles had arrived. For them, it would have been the obnoxious culmination of an old irritant. Moscow had com-



President John F. Kennedy and Dean Rusk. Source: UPI/Corbis-Bettmann.

plained loudly, especially during 1958–1959, when NATO announced its decision to deploy these missiles. There is no evidence that Soviet planners attached any particular strategic significance to the older systems. Militarily, the nuclear-armed U.S. airplanes based in Turkey were more worrisome. But Khrushchev never forgot the affront of these missiles. The Jupiters were not the reason Khrushchev took the extraordinary step of ordering missiles to Cuba, but they provided a ready rationalization for it.⁵⁷

Khrushchev says in his memoirs that he believed “it was high time America learned what it feels like to have her own land and her own people threatened.”⁵⁸ Of course they were already threatened by Russian bombers and a few missiles. Yuri Andropov, then a senior adviser to Khrushchev, privately advised the Soviet leader that deploying Soviet missiles to Cuba was a way to “sight them at the soft underbelly of the Americans.”⁵⁹ Kennedy certainly felt it just that way. “A knife stuck right in our guts,” was the metaphor he used in a meeting on October 19.⁶⁰

As one of the staff planners, General Gribkov, later wrote, “In one stroke he [Khrushchev] could redress the imbalance in strategic nuclear forces.”⁶¹ The Soviet missiles in Cuba would also outflank America’s existing systems for early warning of an attack (which were oriented toward the Arctic and other flight routes from the USSR). On May 21 and 24, Khrushchev formally presented his plan to the Defense Council

and the Presidium and, after pro forma discussions, the proposal was unanimously adopted. Five days later a Soviet delegation was in Havana.

As the U.S. only discovered later, the Soviets intended to develop Cuba into a full-scale strategic base. The authorized deployment also included a submarine base in Cuba that would become the home port for an initial group of 11 submarines, including 7 submarines carrying submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) with 1 megaton yield nuclear warheads. In addition to the nuclear warheads for the ballistic missiles, nuclear weapons would be provided for the coastal defense cruise missiles. The Americans did not know this. Nor did the Soviets plan to reveal that their coastal defenses were nuclear-armed. As Gribkov recalls: “Arcane theories of nuclear deterrence mattered less to us than practical questions of assuring our exposed troops the strongest possible armor against attack.”⁶²

There remain, however, two major objections to the missile power hypothesis. First, why did Khrushchev feel such extraordinary urgency to redress the strategic balance? Why did he feel he could not wait two or three years for his ICBM force to become much larger and more formidable?

Second, why was Khrushchev willing to run such extraordinary risks in order to solve his problem? This was the argument that Kent and his estimators had made, an argument shared at the time by more than one senior Soviet official, too. One answer, which doubtless had some merit, was that Khrushchev was an impulsive person, willing to take risks another leader might not. But McCone’s answer, in his own comment on Kent’s estimate, was that Khrushchev had some great political prize in mind elsewhere in the world, and that he would use the missiles in Cuba in order to win it.⁶³ (That dimension had not been analyzed in Kent’s estimate.) Indeed, in the spring and summer of 1962, had they known about Khrushchev’s plans, no one at the top of either the American or Soviet government would have wondered long about just what prize Khrushchev might have in mind.

Hypothesis 4: Berlin —Win, Trade, or Trap

President Kennedy was not satisfied with the missile power hypothesis. Secretary of Defense McNamara’s argument that the missiles in Cuba did not make much difference to the strategic balance initially seemed persuasive. On the evening of October 16, Kennedy wondered aloud to his advisers: “If it doesn’t increase very much their strategic strength, why is it—can any Russian expert tell us—why they . . . ?” Some of his advisers explained how the missiles might

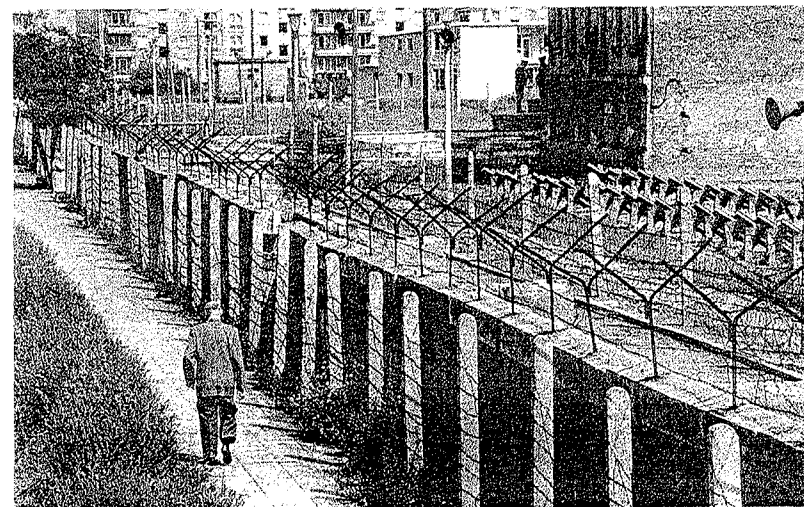


This photo was taken in one of the low-level reconnaissance flights that began on October 25, 1962; U-2 photos, taken from 70,000 feet rather than 300, are much harder to interpret. *Source:* John F. Kennedy Library.

indeed change the strategic balance. Kennedy was still not convinced. Why was Khrushchev taking this risk? Surely the missiles were not so valuable just for their own sake? His advisers moved on to another subject, but Kennedy was preoccupied with this question. He burst out with the comment that “we never really ever had a case where it’s been quite this . . .” Kennedy still did not get an answer.⁶⁴

For Kennedy, at least, a more plausible answer dawned on him shortly afterward. It must be Berlin. Khrushchev would use the missiles to solve the Berlin problem—on his own terms. At the first meeting, Rusk had voiced the suspicion that “Berlin is very much involved in this. For the first time, I’m beginning to wonder whether maybe Mr. Khrushchev is entirely rational about Berlin. We’ve already talked about his obsession with it.”⁶⁵

In 1945, Berlin had been divided into zones of occupation among the Americans, British, French, and Soviets. As occupied Germany became a divided Germany, the Western sectors of Berlin became a democratic, capitalist metropolis unfortunately located in the heart of the communist East German state. The East Germans considered West Berlin a mortal threat to their fragile creation. For this and other reasons, Khrushchev had decided in 1958 to make West Berlin the pivotal



The Berlin Wall. *Source:* UPI/Corbis-Bettmann.

battlefield in the Cold War. He delivered an ultimatum demanding, in effect, that the West withdraw from Berlin. After a period of intense confrontation with the Eisenhower administration, Khrushchev had agreed to lift the ultimatum in anticipation of a 1960 summit with Eisenhower. The planned summit was then cancelled after an American U-2 reconnaissance aircraft was shot down over the Soviet Union.

Khrushchev had renewed the ultimatum to Kennedy when they met in Vienna in June 1961. Western troops, he announced, must be out of Berlin by the end of the year. Kennedy responded with a major buildup of American forces, but he knew that was not enough. In military terms, the facts were clear. The U.S. and its NATO allies could not defend Berlin with conventional forces. Kennedy thought he could deter a Soviet move only by posing a credible threat to escalate a conflict to nuclear war. In August, the Communist authorities built a wall between East and West Berlin. As year end approached, in November 1961, Khrushchev again stepped back from the brink, to allow the completion of intense negotiations that culminated in talks between his foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko, and the American secretary of state, Dean Rusk, during March and April of 1962. Yet in letting the negotiations take their course, Khrushchev made clear he was not trying to “play better the next fall-back position as diplomats call it.” He warned that the U.S. and its allies had to give up their position in Berlin. The

Soviet leader's words were fateful. "You have to understand, I have no ground to retreat further, there is a precipice behind."⁶⁶

As the negotiations over Berlin foundered again in public stalemate in April 1962, Khrushchev once more renewed his pressure on Berlin. In Moscow, the American Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson could not understand what Khrushchev was up to. No American knew Khrushchev better or had followed his positions more closely. In fact, the Soviet ambassador to Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin later admirably appraised Thompson as "the best American ambassador in Moscow during the entire period of the Cold War." But Thompson was puzzled by Khrushchev's increasing pressure on Berlin. "He must surely know our position is firm," he cabled back to Washington, and "it does not seem reasonable that he would wish further to commit his personal prestige which [is] already deeply engaged." And the pressure just kept increasing.⁶⁷

In August 1962, Thompson flew back to Washington carrying a personal message from Khrushchev to Kennedy. Would the American president like the Berlin crisis brought to a head "before or after our Congressional elections" in November? "He did not want to make things more difficult for [the] President—and in fact would like to help him." Dobrynin was told to approach White House aide Theodore Sorensen, one of Kennedy's closest political advisers. Bundy warned Sorensen that "the Berlin crisis has warmed up a lot in recent weeks and looks as if it is getting worse." The Soviets heard from Sorensen that any crisis would be exploited by Kennedy's political opponents. So, in early September, Dobrynin brought word from Moscow reassuring Sorensen that they would not do anything to make Kennedy's life more difficult before the congressional elections.⁶⁸

When Khrushchev met with a member of Kennedy's cabinet, Interior Secretary Stewart Udall, on September 6 he warned that he intended to settle the Berlin issue once and for all. If the Americans wanted to start a nuclear war, that would be their choice. Khrushchev was earthy and blunt. "It's been a long time since you could spank us like a little boy—now we can swat your ass. So let's not talk about force. We're equally strong. You want Berlin. Access to it goes through East Germany. We have the advantage. If you want to do anything, you have to start a war."⁶⁹

Khrushchev then set another deadline for the third and last time. In a private letter to Kennedy dated September 28, Khrushchev affirmed that "we will do nothing with regard to West Berlin until the elections in the U.S." After the elections, apparently in the second half of November, it would be necessary to "eliminate this dangerous



President Kennedy and Soviet Leader Nikita Khrushchev meet in Vienna.
Source: John F. Kennedy Library.

hot-bed which spoils our relations all the time." Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko traveled to the United States in October and met with Kennedy on October 18 (after Kennedy had learned of the missiles in Cuba, but before Gromyko was aware the missiles had been discovered). Again, Gromyko warned that the Berlin issue would be renewed in November to get "concrete results." "If there should be no such understanding, the Soviet Government would be compelled, and Mr. Gromyko wished to emphasize the word 'compelled,'" to conclude a treaty with East Germany that formally liquidated Allied rights. The USSR would also "be compelled," Gromyko added, to take the steps called for by this treaty implying the ejection of Western forces from Berlin. Kennedy had said he liked frankness, so Gromyko said he was being frank. "As Mr. Khrushchev had said, the NATO military base and the occupation regime in West Berlin represented a rotten tooth which must be pulled out, and no one would be harmed by that." To conclude on a more positive note, if the Berlin question could be solved, "there would remain no other questions on which our two states were at loggerheads, with the possible exception of disarmament."⁷⁰

When the missiles were discovered, Llewellyn Thompson (by this time recalled from Moscow to serve as the State Department's special adviser on the Soviet Union) solved his puzzle. He had wondered in

July why Khrushchev seemed to be staking even more of his prestige on a policy that would meet unaltered American resistance. Now Thompson understood. "[Khrushchev's] not a fool—I was always curious as to why he said he would defer this [confrontation on Berlin] until after the election. It seems to me it is all related to this [move of missiles into Cuba]." Kennedy agreed. Khrushchev "played a double game," Kennedy explained a few days later to the British prime minister. "You remember that he kept saying he was coming over here after the [U.S. congressional] election and would do nothing to disturb the situation until after the election. He said that the weapons were defensive, that they weren't moving any missiles there and all the rest. And obviously he has been building this up in order to face us with a bad situation in November at the time he was going to squeeze us on Berlin."⁷¹

Thus for Kennedy, Khrushchev's maneuver made sense for victory in Berlin. If the Americans did nothing, Khrushchev would force the West out of Berlin, confident that the missiles in Cuba would deter the Americans from starting a war. If the Americans tried to bargain, the terms would be a trade of Cuba and Berlin. Since Berlin was immeasurably more important than Cuba, that trade would also be a win for Khrushchev. If the Americans blockaded or attacked Cuba, Khrushchev could then use this as the excuse for an equivalent blockade or attack on Berlin. "So that whatever we do in regard to Cuba," Kennedy said, "it gives him the chance to do the same with regard to Berlin."⁷² Worse yet, Kennedy thought, America's European allies would then blame the loss of Berlin on the United States, since they would not understand why America felt the need to attack Cuba. The Alliance would be split by a dire Soviet threat, and again Moscow would be the ultimate winner.

As Kennedy saw it, his choice in responding to Soviet missiles in Cuba was not one between provoking a nuclear crisis over Cuba, or no nuclear crisis. He could either have a nuclear crisis over Cuba now, when the onus of starting a nuclear war would be on Khrushchev, or he could have a nuclear crisis the next month in Berlin, when the U.S. strategic position would be much worse and the burden of initiating a nuclear war would be on Kennedy. This formulation of the issue was ultimately the essence of Kennedy's analysis of his predicament to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on October 19. "Our problem is not merely Cuba," he said, "it is also Berlin. And when we recognize the importance of Berlin to Europe, and recognize the importance of our allies to us, that's what has made this thing be a dilemma for three days. Otherwise, our answer would be quite easy." He went on: "On the other hand, we've got to do something. Because if we do nothing we're going to have the problem of Berlin anyway. That was made clear last night [by Gromyko]. We're going to

have this knife stuck right in our guts" when the missiles in Cuba become operational. In bargaining terms, one had to admire Khrushchev's move. "The advantage is, from Khrushchev's point of view, he takes a great chance but there are quite some rewards to it."⁷³

Examining the evidence about Soviet decisionmaking in retrospect, we can find a good deal of evidence to support the Berlin hypothesis. Recalling the spring of 1962, Dobrynin notes that "Germany and Berlin overshadowed everything."⁷⁴ The previous year, in September 1961, *after* the Berlin Wall had been erected, Khrushchev had estab-

FIGURE 1

Confidential Khrushchev-Kennedy Correspondence (September 1961–October 1962)

<i>Sent by</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Subjects (in order mentioned)</i>
Khrushchev	9/29/61	Berlin, Laos
Kennedy	10/16/61	Berlin, Laos
Khrushchev	11/9/61	Berlin
Khrushchev	11/10/61	Laos, Vietnam
Kennedy	11/16/61	Laos, Vietnam
Kennedy	12/2/61	Berlin
Khrushchev	12/13/61	Berlin
Khrushchev	1/16/62 ¹	Berlin
Kennedy	2/15/62	Berlin
Khrushchev	3/10/62	Berlin, nuclear testing ²
Kennedy	6/5/62	Berlin
Khrushchev	7/5/62	Berlin
Kennedy	7/17/62	Berlin
Khrushchev	9/4/62	Nuclear testing
Kennedy	9/15/62	Nuclear testing
Khrushchev	9/28/62	Nuclear testing, Berlin, Cuba, surveillance of Soviet ships, U-2 intrusion into Soviet airspace, Berlin again
Kennedy	10/8/62	Nuclear testing

¹ Approximately.

² Khrushchev states he is raising the subject only because Robert Kennedy had raised it in an oral communication.

Source: *FRUS 1961–1963*, vol. 6, *Kennedy-Khrushchev Exchanges*, which was checked against holdings in Russian archives.

lished a private, confidential channel for writing to Kennedy, about subjects and in terms that neither felt obliged to share with others in his own government. Figure 1 lists the subjects the leaders thought needed discussion in this channel. Khrushchev's last message before the missile crisis announced his November target for resolving Berlin. After the missile crisis, however, Khrushchev dropped the subject of Berlin from the letters, making only a couple of perfunctory references which Kennedy ignored.

But in the spring of 1962, from Khrushchev's perspective, he had let a highly publicized deadline for results slip once again. Khrushchev's political standing at home and in the Communist world was already jeopardized by the failure or retraction of several of his most important initiatives in fiscal and agricultural policy.⁷⁵ The Americans seemed to think they were strong enough to threaten credibly to start a nuclear war if the Soviets used their local military superiority to squeeze the Western position in Berlin. To Khrushchev, Washington's willingness to threaten such a war "can rest—excuse my harsh judgments—only on the megalomania, on an intention to act from the position of strength."⁷⁶

In April and early May 1962, as Khrushchev was finalizing his decision to send missiles to Cuba, he was confronting an enormous problem with Berlin. He had let the deadline in his 1958 ultimatum pass with the promise of successful negotiations. The promise had gone unfulfilled. He had then let his 1961 deadline pass, again with the promise of negotiations. By the end of March 1962, when Rusk and Gromyko were stalemated, and certainly by late April, it was clear that those negotiations had now failed, too. The failure was being publicly acknowledged. He was feeling unrelenting pressure from the East German comrades, who advocated tougher Soviet policy, urging escalation.⁷⁷

On May 12, at a critical moment in Khrushchev's reflection about sending missiles to Cuba, the Soviet leader had an opportunity—the first in months—to talk with someone from Kennedy's White House. He took it, spending fourteen hours over two days with Kennedy's press secretary, Pierre Salinger. The central issue was Berlin, which seemed almost an obsession, fused together with issues of missile power. Kennedy had just given a press interview in which he had acknowledged that the U.S. might need to use nuclear weapons first in order to defend areas of vital interest. Kennedy was alluding to Berlin, and gradual escalation—flexible response—not a general preemptive attack. Khrushchev knew that. But he was angry about Kennedy's press remarks. "[N]ot a single fool wants to fight over West Berlin." The

United States needed Berlin "like a dog needs five legs." Khrushchev said, "The key is in the hands of President Kennedy, because he will have to fire the first shot." The Soviet Union, he added forcefully, was "ready to meet this strike." Perhaps Khrushchev was not so confident. The next day he left for the trip to Bulgaria during which, by his own account, he made up his mind to send the missiles to Cuba. Nine days later the Kremlin's Defense Council ratified the decision.⁷⁸

What were Khrushchev's options for resolving his Berlin problem? Khrushchev could walk away from the issue. But he had ostentatiously set an agenda and past deadlines to which he had fully committed his waning prestige. He could accept an interim settlement, more or less the status quo. Kennedy had offered such a settlement (infuriating West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer) but Khrushchev had already rejected it. Or Khrushchev could choose to renew the confrontation, hopefully under more advantageous circumstances. The Soviet leader had already rejected the first two choices. The Americans stood by what he called their "policy of strength" on Berlin.⁷⁹

In March 1962, as his new ambassador was leaving for Washington, Khrushchev told Dobrynin that the Berlin question was the principal issue in Soviet-American relations. The American belief in their supposed nuclear superiority was making them act, as Khrushchev put it, "particularly arrogant." Khrushchev concluded, "It's high time their long arms were cut shorter." He liked Kennedy and thought of him as a man of character. Yet, Dobrynin recalls, Khrushchev "did not conceal his belief that putting pressure on Kennedy might bring us some success."⁸⁰

Khrushchev certainly needed a success. As James Richter observed, "Khrushchev's domestic position set the stage for his foreign policy behavior. He needed a foreign policy success more than ever. The mounting difficulties in his domestic programs discredited his arguments that he could lead the Soviet Union to a rapid victory over the United States in the economic competition, even as the increased strains on capital investment reinforced his incentive to save on defense spending."⁸¹

Against this backdrop, which conditioned Khrushchev's evaluation of all his options, the missile power and Berlin hypotheses offer the most satisfactory explanation of the thinking behind the Soviet move to send nuclear missiles to Cuba. Khrushchev would gain a quick, relatively cheap, boost to Soviet missile power. The Berlin crisis, he apparently reasoned, might be pressed to a successful conclusion. Foreign policy triumph in hand, Khrushchev could now offer Kennedy the "radical" improvement in superpower relations that he had promised. He could return, too, to his hopes for Soviet domestic renewal, now better able to move resources from defense and heavy industry to the

needs of his people. "The Cuban missile venture," Richter concluded, "offered him the prospect, however slim, that he could emerge from this situation and salvage his already declining authority."⁸²

The defense of Cuba was a constant consideration in the background. But it is notable that, during his October 18 meeting with Gromyko, Kennedy twice said his government did not intend to invade Cuba and freely offered to pledge that there would be no invasion of Cuba, either by refugees or by U.S. forces. Knowing what was happening and what mattered to Khrushchev, Gromyko ignored Kennedy's offer and did not even consider it important enough to mention in his cable to Khrushchev reporting on the meeting.⁸³

But it must be acknowledged that the missile power and Berlin hypotheses, as well as the others considered above, fail to account for many other features of what the Soviets actually did. First, each of the four hypotheses assumes that the Soviet decision to emplace missiles led to a plan for implementing that decision, by installing air defenses first to protect the bases and deter photographic reconnaissance, and then sending in nuclear weapons. But Soviet actions appeared inconsistent with this reconstructed plan. It appeared to the Americans that the MRBMs were installed *before* the cover of surface-to-air missiles was in place. Kennedy's adviser and speechwriter, Theodore Sorensen, expressed forcefully the bewilderment of the White House over this fact: "Why the Soviets failed to coordinate this timing is still inexplicable."⁸⁴ We now know that in fact the Soviet Union did install the air defense cover on time, before the missiles were put in place, in order to shield the missiles from being discovered. Why, then, did the Soviet forces in Cuba permit the U-2 to fly over Cuba and spot the missiles?

Khrushchev's grand plan for unveiling his *fait accompli* presents a second difficulty. He planned to visit the U.S. and announce the true situation in the second half of November. Presumably by then the installation of the missiles would be complete. But even on the round-the-clock construction schedule adopted after the U.S. announcement that the missiles had been discovered, only the MRBMs would be in place. The IRBM complexes would not have achieved operational readiness until December.⁸⁵ This further failure of coordination is difficult to understand.

A third puzzle arises about the Soviet omission of camouflage at the missile sites. During the crisis, Thompson thought at one point that the Soviets had wanted the Americans to discover the missiles during construction. "It's so easy to camouflage these things, or hide them in the woods. Why didn't they do it in the first place? They surely expected us to see them at some stage."⁸⁶ How else can one explain the

fact that the missile sites were constructed in the configuration that was standard in the Soviet Union? At the White House meeting on the evening of October 16, the intelligence briefer explained that they could spot the launchers, in part, because "they have a four-in-line deployment pattern . . . which is identical . . . representative of the deployments that we note in the Soviet Union for similar missiles."⁸⁷ But a Soviet desire to be found out hardly squares with the extensive and effective camouflage and deception that characterized transport of the missiles to Cuba and from the docks to the sites.

Finally, why did the Soviet Union persist in the face of Kennedy's repeated warnings? Alexander George and Richard Smoke seek to explain the failure of deterrence in this case as an example of a *fait accompli*. In such situations, the initiator of the action being deterred (Khrushchev) believes that no commitment exists against his intended action and that the action can be accomplished before the defender has the time or opportunity to establish a commitment and make it credible.⁸⁸ Are George and Smoke right? Was the American signal too faint, or not heard? Was the warning not credible? How could the Soviets have believed that Kennedy would not react to their move?

Khrushchev did not ask his ambassador in Washington or any other known experts on the United States for a considered analysis of his judgement. The foreign minister, Gromyko, later wrote that he had warned Khrushchev privately that "putting our missiles in Cuba would cause a political explosion in the United States. I am absolutely certain of that, and this should be taken into account." When offering this assessment, he feared Khrushchev might "fly into a rage," but there was no reaction. According to Gromyko's account, Khrushchev was simply unmoved by this advice. His ambassador, Dobrynin, later complained that Khrushchev "grossly misunderstood the psychology of his opponents. Had he asked the embassy beforehand, we could have predicted the violent American reaction to his adventure once it became known. It is worth noting that Castro understood this. . . . But Khrushchev wanted to spring a surprise on Washington; it was he who got the surprise in the end when his secret plan was uncovered."⁸⁹

WHY DID THE UNITED STATES RESPOND TO THE MISSILE DEPLOYMENT WITH A BLOCKADE?

The U.S. response to the Soviet Union's emplacement of missiles in Cuba can be understood in strategic terms as simple value-maximizing escalation. American nuclear superiority could be counted on to para-

lyze Soviet nuclear power. Soviet use of nuclear weapons in response to American use of lower levels of violence would be wildly irrational, since it would mean virtual destruction of the Soviet Communist system and the Russian nation. In the Caribbean, American superiority was overwhelming; it could be initiated at a low level while threatening, with high credibility, an ascending sequence of steps short of the nuclear threshold. All that was required was for the United States to use its strategic and local superiority in a way that demonstrated American determination to see the missiles removed, while at the same time allowing Moscow time and room to retreat without humiliation. The naval blockade (euphemistically called a quarantine to circumvent the niceties of international law) did just that.

The United States had thought about logical Soviet countermoves, especially on Berlin. By not attacking Cuba, the U.S. avoided inviting an attack on Berlin. President Kennedy overruled suggestions that the blockade should be extended to the necessities of life in Cuba, reasoning that therefore the Soviets might be less likely to reciprocate with an identical blockade of Berlin and the danger of an escalation to war would be reduced.⁹⁰ A Soviet blockade to keep nuclear arms and materials out of Berlin would be meaningless since the U.S. was not shipping such weapons into Berlin.

The process by which the U.S. government selected the blockade exemplified this logic. Informed of the presence of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba, the president assembled his most trusted advisers. The principal members of this group, which was later christened the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExCom), included Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Secretary of State Rusk, Secretary of Defense McNamara, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Taylor, CIA Director McCone, Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon, National Security Adviser Bundy, Special Counsel Theodore Sorensen, Undersecretary of State (Rusk's deputy) George Ball, Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric, Deputy Undersecretary of State U. Alexis Johnson, Ambassador at Large for Soviet Affairs Thompson, Assistant Secretary of State Edwin Martin and State policy planner Walt Rostow, and Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze. Vice President Lyndon Johnson also sat in on almost all of the key White House meetings. UN ambassador and former presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson came to Washington and joined a few of the White House sessions, as did former Defense Secretary Robert Lovett. Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson gave private advice to Kennedy and attended some meetings at the State Department, but did not attend any ExCom meetings at the White House.



President Kennedy's "Executive Committee," meeting in the Cabinet Room during the Cuban missile crisis. The President is seated in front of the flag. To his right are Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Under Secretary of State George Ball. In front of the fireplace, with his face hidden, is Director of Central Intelligence John McCone. On McCone's right are Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs U. Alexis Johnson (chin in hand), Ambassador at Large Llewellyn Thompson (leaning forward), Attorney General Robert Kennedy (leaning back), Vice President Lyndon Johnson (leaning forward and almost hidden from view). Directly opposite the President is Secretary of the Treasury C. Douglas Dillon. On Dillon's right are two presidential assistants, McGeorge Bundy and Theodore Sorensen. In the foreground, head tilted and back to the camera, is acting U.S. Information Agency director Donald Wilson. To his right, at the end of the table, is Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze. On Nitze's right, with his hand on his brow, General Maxwell Taylor. Between Taylor and the President are Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. *Source:* John F. Kennedy Library.

The five days after the discovery of the Soviet missiles were spent canvassing all the possible alternatives and weighing the alternatives for and against each. Six major categories of action were considered, before a fusion of several was finally chosen.

Alternative 1. Do Nothing

American vulnerability to Soviet missiles was not new. Since the United States already lived under the gun of missiles based in Russia, a Soviet capability to strike the United States from Cuba made little

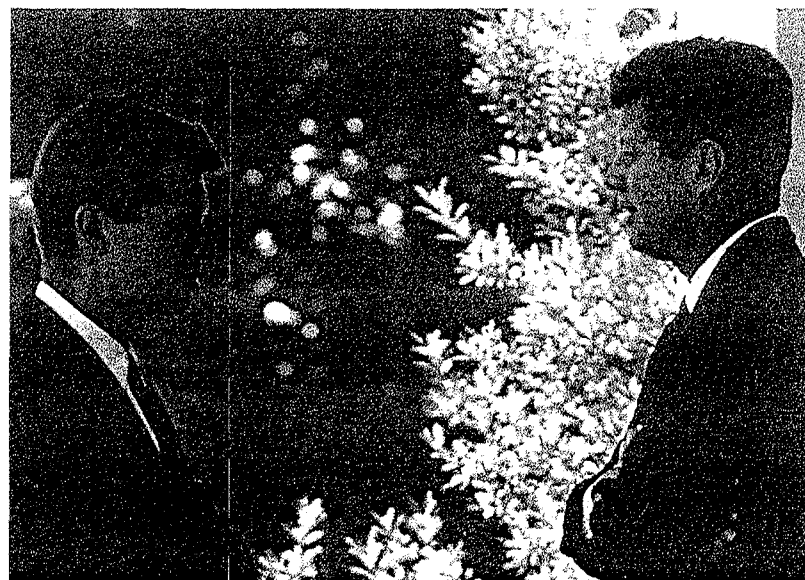


Another view of Kennedy's "Executive Committee": Rusk is standing and so is President Kennedy (almost completely obscured from view by Rusk). Otherwise the members are seated in the same positions. *Source:* John F. Kennedy Library.

real difference. The larger danger was that the United States might overreact to this Soviet move and prompt an explosive countermove against Berlin. The Soviet action would be announced by the United States in such a calm, casual manner that it could deflate whatever political capital Khrushchev hoped to make of the missiles.

No one among Kennedy's advisers made the case for doing nothing, except Bundy. Bundy only made the argument on October 18. By the next day, he had changed his mind and became an advocate of an air strike. But on October 18, Bundy's case, as Kennedy summarized it, was "that there would be, inevitably, a Soviet reprisal against Berlin and that this would divide our alliances and we would bear the responsibility. He felt we would be better off to merely take note of the existence of these missiles, and to wait until the crunch comes in Berlin, and not play what he thought might be the Soviet game."

Kennedy recalled that "everyone else felt that for us to fail to respond would throw into question our willingness to respond over Berlin, would divide our allies and our country. [They felt] that we would be faced with a crunch over Berlin in two or three months and that by that time the Soviets would have a large missile arsenal in the Western Hemisphere which would weaken our whole position in



President Kennedy and his brother Robert confer outside the Oval Office at the White House. *Source:* UPI/Corbis-Bettmann.

this hemisphere and cause, face us with the same problems we're going to have in Berlin anyway."⁹¹

Though he discounted the military significance of the Soviet deployment, McNamara still conceded that political considerations required some sort of action. As he said on day one: "it's not a military problem that we're facing. It's a political problem. It's a problem of holding the Alliance together. It's a problem of properly conditioning Khrushchev for our future moves." McNamara also alluded to the domestic political ramifications of any American action or inaction.⁹²

Domestic politics were certainly a factor for Kennedy. Given the heated Republican criticisms of Kennedy's handling of Cuba, the president was sure the domestic consequences of inaction would be intolerable. Alone with his brother and feeling the tension of the moment, President Kennedy confided that, "It looks really mean, doesn't it? But, on the other hand, there wasn't any other choice. If he's [Khrushchev's] going to get this mean on this one, in our part of the world . . . no choice. I don't think there was a choice."

Robert Kennedy agreed. "Well, there isn't any choice. I mean, you would have been, you would have been impeached." President

Kennedy echoed that, "Well, I think I would have been impeached . . . on the grounds that I said they wouldn't do it [put missiles in Cuba], and . . ." He left the sentence unfinished.⁹³ Even allowing for the hyperbole of the moment, the comments underscore the sense that doing nothing was not a serious alternative for the president.

Alternative 2: Diplomatic Pressures

Two basic forms of diplomatic pressure were considered. Former ambassador to the Soviet Union Charles Bohlen and Thompson proposed a secret ultimatum to Khrushchev demanding a removal of the missiles and giving him an opportunity to comply without a public confrontation or military action.

Another version of diplomacy, suggested by Adlai Stevenson, would be an appeal to the United Nations or Organization of American States for inspection of Cuba and an effort to negotiate the removal of the missiles with bargaining on both sides, possibly at a summit meeting. The final settlement might include neutralization of Cuba, with U.S. withdrawal from the Guantanamo base or withdrawal of the U.S. Jupiter missiles from Turkey or Italy or both.

Both diplomatic approaches had particular drawbacks. To send a secret emissary to Khrushchev demanding withdrawal of the missiles would pose unacceptable results. On the one hand, this would invite Khrushchev to seize the diplomatic initiative, perhaps committing him to strategic retaliation in response to an attack on tiny Cuba, while waiting for opinion in the United States and overseas to force a conference like that of Chamberlain and Hitler at Munich. On the other hand, the U.S. would be tendering an ultimatum hard for any great power to accept without making a counterproposal. To confront Khrushchev at a summit would guarantee demands for U.S. concessions and the superficial similarity between U.S. missiles in Turkey and Russian missiles in Cuba could not be ignored. The Soviet Union could veto any resolution in the U.N. Security Council. While the diplomats argued, the missiles would become operational.

But why not offer to trade the Jupiters in Turkey and Italy for the missiles in Cuba? Few thought the missiles had any value. The U.S. had asked the Turks to forgo the deployment in the spring of 1961, but the Turks had insisted on going ahead and the U.S. had acquiesced. Still, plans had been developed for replacing the Jupiters, at least symbolically, with the promise that U.S. nuclear missile submarines would be placed offshore, committed to Turkey's defense. Kennedy believed, however, that now was "no time for concessions that could break up the Alliance by confirming European suspicions

that we would sacrifice their security to protect our interests in an area of no concern to them. Instead of being on the diplomatic defensive, we should be indicting the Soviet Union for its duplicity and its threat to world peace." Kennedy believed that such moves, at this time, "would convey to the world that we had been frightened into abandoning our position." The U.S. might acknowledge its willingness to withdraw these missiles at some point, but only in the future.⁹⁴

Alternative 3: A Secret Approach to Castro

The crisis provided an opportunity to divorce Cuba from Soviet Communism by offering Castro the alternatives: "split or fall." Introducing the idea, Rusk thought there might be "one chance in a hundred" but perhaps Castro might break with Moscow "if he knew that he were in deadly jeopardy."⁹⁵ The group, however, did not think Castro would be tempted by the offer. Such an offer might also give advance warning of American intentions while inviting some of the same diplomatic entanglement that bedeviled the idea of an ultimatum to Khrushchev. Finally, of course, these were Soviet missiles firmly under Soviet control.

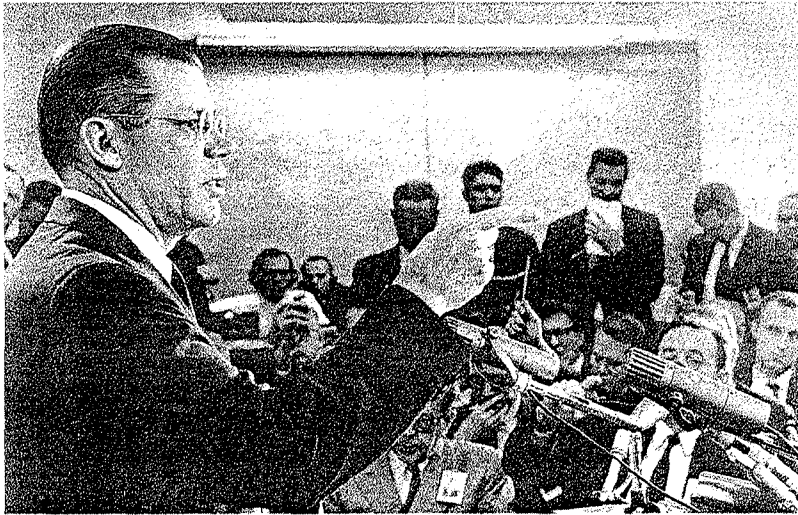
Alternative 4: Invasion

The United States could take this occasion not only to remove the missiles but also to rid itself of Castro. Contingency plans for an invasion had been made and practiced. During the first day of crisis deliberations, Kennedy remarked that the revelation of missiles in Cuba "shows the Bay of Pigs [attack with Cuban exiles against Cuba in 1961] was really right. We'd got it right. That was [a choice between] better and better, and worse and worse." General Taylor replied: "I'm a pessimist, Mr. President. We have a war plan over there for you. [It] calls for a quarter of a million American soldiers, Marines, and airmen to take an island we launched 1,800 Cubans against, a year and a half ago. We've changed our evaluations. Well . . ." he trailed off.⁹⁶

An invasion was considered a last resort. It was a massive, costly operation bogging America into what Taylor called "that deep mud" of Cuba. It would force American troops to confront Soviet troops in the Cold War's first case of direct combat between ground forces of the superpowers. Such brinksmanship risked nuclear disaster, including an equivalent Soviet move against Berlin.

Alternative 5: Air Strike

Far cleaner than an invasion would be the removal of the missile sites by a swift conventional air attack. This was the firm, effective counteraction

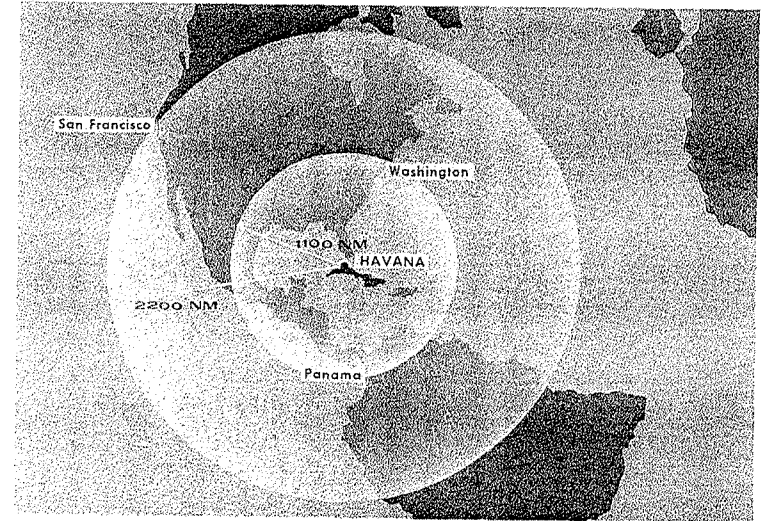


Robert McNamara addresses a press conference during the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis. *Source:* UPI/Corbis-Bettmann.

the attempted deception deserved. A strike would remove the missiles before they became operational and could launch nuclear warheads against Americans. Done immediately, it would eliminate the risk that the Soviets would realize the American discovery and act first, concealing the missiles and making an easy strike impossible, as well as initiating diplomatic and military countermoves. The air strike would preserve the military advantages of surprise. Kennedy would make a public statement to the nation and to the Soviets as the planes approached their targets, describing his reasons and warning Moscow against retaliation.

Kennedy leaned toward this option at the outset and remained tempted by it. Four difficulties, however, blunted its initial appeal.

First, could the strike be kept small and tightly focused? Even if the missile sites could be destroyed, the Soviet MiG-21s and the IL-28 bombers might attack the southeastern United States, Taylor repeatedly called Kennedy's attention to this problem, and the fact that the Joint Chiefs of Staff had just concluded that air defenses of this part of the country were lamentably weak. Americans would be furious if cities in Florida were bombed and the military had not even tried to destroy the MiGs and the IL-28s and their airfields. Adding these targets would significantly enlarge the size of the strike. Nor could any



Variants of this map were widely distributed by the media during the Cuban Missile Crisis. *Source:* John F. Kennedy Library.

responsible Air Force officer endorse a large-scale strike that did not try, at the same time, to eliminate the enemy air defenses that would be killing his pilots. By October 18, a near-consensus developed among Kennedy's advisers. The advisers were persuaded that the only feasible air strike would have to include the air defense sites and the bombers, requiring attacks by hundreds of aircraft on targets throughout Cuba. This in turn might result in chaos and political collapse of the Castro regime, sucking America into an invasion.

To counter this argument, Bundy and Acheson held out for a narrower, more surgical strike. On October 20, the key day of the decision to go with the blockade, there were actually two air strike options before the president, the small version and the large. Kennedy apparently leaned more toward the smaller version, but other objections applied to either kind of strike.

Second, a surprise air attack would kill Russians at the missile sites—and elsewhere, if the attack were more massive. An attack on the military troops and citizens of a great power could not be regarded lightly. Kennedy worried that the missiles might be launched against the United States, and ordered unprecedented emergency civil defense planning to protect and evacuate major cities. Pressures on the Soviet Union to retaliate would be so strong that an attack on Berlin or

Turkey seemed highly probable. Kennedy played out the scenario. If they went into Berlin, U.S. troops would be overrun. Then, someone asked, what do we do? Ball answered, "Go to general war." Bundy agreed, "It's then general war." Kennedy: "You mean a nuclear exchange?" The others agreed. A minute later Kennedy underscored that "the question really is to what action we take which lessens the chances of a nuclear exchange, which obviously is the prime failure—that's obvious to us—and at the same time maintain some degree of solidarity with our allies."⁹⁷

Third, there was the question of advance warning. A surprise attack, Ball told the group, was "like Pearl Harbor. It's the kind of conduct that one might expect of the Soviet Union. It is not conduct that one expects of the United States." No way could be found to solve the problem of advance warning. To attack without warning seemed repellent. Rusk called it "this business of carrying the mark of Cain on your brow for the rest of your life."⁹⁸

Fourth, the attack might not get all the missiles and would not guarantee against future Soviet deployments. From the start the Joint Chiefs of Staff advocated an invasion, in part to do the job thoroughly. Taylor disagreed. But after intelligence showed the installation of IRBM launch sites as well as the MRBMs, he joined his Joint Chiefs of Staff colleagues in agreeing that both an air strike and an invasion would be needed to deal definitively with the Soviet deployment. This was just the chain of escalation Bohlen had singled out in his influential argument against a no-warning air strike. Bohlen thought "it will immediately lead to war with Cuba and would not be the neat quick disposal of their bases, as was suggested. Furthermore, I am reasonably certain that the Allied reaction would be dead against us, especially if the Soviets retaliated locally (in Turkey or Italy or in Berlin). . . . I feel very strongly that any belief in a limited quick action is an illusion and would lead us into a full war with Cuba on a step-by-step basis which would greatly increase the probability of general war."⁹⁹

Alternative 6: Blockade

Indirect military action in the form of some type of blockade, an option first raised for consideration by McNamara on October 16, became more attractive as the president and his advisers dissected the other alternatives. An embargo on military shipments to Cuba enforced by a naval blockade, however, was not without its own problems.

First, even the term presented a formidable difficulty. Most advisers made the point that a blockade was a hostile act that they thought

would have to be accompanied by a declaration of war against Cuba. By October 19, however, the State and Justice Departments' legal experts had concluded that such a declaration might be avoided, but another legal justification, based on the Rio Treaty for defense of the Western Hemisphere, could be obtained only with a resolution that commanded a two-thirds vote of the members of the Organization of American States.

Second, could the United States blockade Cuba without inviting Soviet reprisal in Berlin? Joint blockades might result in the lifting of both, bringing the United States back to where it started and allowing the Soviets additional time to complete the missiles.

Third, the possible consequences of the blockade resembled those that counted against the air strike. If Soviet ships did not stop, the United States would be forced to fire the first shot, inviting retaliation. Moreover, Castro might attack American ships blockading his island. This possibility, and that of Soviet retaliation, led Kennedy to tell congressional leaders on October 22 that, even with the blockade, "we may have the war in the next 24 hours."¹⁰⁰

Finally, how could a blockade be related to the problem of the existence of missiles already on the island of Cuba and approaching operational readiness daily? A blockade offered the Soviets a spectrum of delaying tactics with which to buy time to complete the missile installations. "It's a very slow death," Robert Kennedy complained. "It builds up, and goes over a period of months, and during that period you've got all these people yelling and screaming about it."¹⁰¹

President Kennedy immediately touched on this major problem with the blockade option after Thompson urged the idea at the White House on October 18. "What," Kennedy asked, "do we do with the weapons already there?"

Thompson's answer was equally concise: "Demand they're dismantled, and say that we're going to maintain constant surveillance, and if they are armed, we would then take them out. And then maybe do it." He went on, "I think we should be under no illusions, that is probably in the end going to lead to the same thing [a strike]. But we do it in an entirely different posture and background and much less danger of getting up into the big war."¹⁰²

Thompson's answer highlighted the existence of two major variants of the blockade option, which corresponded to the two kinds of diplomatic approaches being discussed. Thompson and former Treasury Secretary Douglas Dillon were the first to propose fusing the

blockade with Bohlen's "ultimatum" approach. This approach, also supported by John McCone and Robert Kennedy, would open with the blockade, refuse detailed negotiations, demand removal of the missiles, and threaten further military action.¹⁰³

But other proponents of the blockade saw it as an opening to negotiations. In this approach, supported by McNamara, Stevenson, and Sorensen, the U.S. would seek only to freeze the status quo, not demanding removal of the missiles already there. Meanwhile, negotiations would be arranged, including the offer of a summit meeting, to strike a deal that might trade withdrawal of missiles in Cuba for American concessions on its Guantanamo base in Cuba or its Jupiter missiles in Turkey and Italy. The two different blockade options were presented to Kennedy on October 20.

Either way, the blockade had several advantages: (1) It was a middle course between inaction and attack, aggressive enough to communicate firmness of intention, but still not so precipitous as a strike. (2) It placed on Khrushchev the burden of choice for the next step. He could avoid a direct military clash by keeping his ships away. (3) No possible military confrontation could be more acceptable to the United States than a naval engagement in the Caribbean. At our doorstep, a naval blockade was invincible. (4) A blockade permitted the United States, by flexing its conventional muscles, to exploit the threat of subsequent nonnuclear steps in each of which the United States would enjoy significant local superiority.

The blockade was only chosen, however, after the option was sharpened into the blockade and ultimatum approach on October 20–21.¹⁰⁴ That is, the blockade would be coupled with a demand for withdrawal of the missiles. No summit meeting or other channel of direct negotiation would be offered to delay or obfuscate resolution of the central issue. The military move of a blockade would convey urgency and a sense of imminent confrontation.

Thus the blockade would be only the first step, a kind of warning shot. Direct military action against Cuba was still being threatened, though the action was being postponed. Still, it was a close call. Kennedy had started leaning toward the blockade option as early as October 18, but on October 22 he explained to his National Security Council, "from the beginning, the idea of a quick strike was very tempting and I really didn't give up on that until yesterday morning. ... [I]t looked like we would have all of the difficulties of Pearl Harbor and not have finished the job. The job can only be finished by an invasion."¹⁰⁵ Kennedy knew that job might still lie ahead.

WHY DID THE SOVIET UNION WITHDRAW THE MISSILES?

On Sunday morning, October 28, the Soviets broadcast the message that ended the critical phase of the crisis. Khrushchev announced the Soviet decision to "dismantle the arms which you described as offensive, and to crate and return them to the Soviet Union."¹⁰⁶ The American objective was achieved. Obviously, the United States had done something right. The reason the Soviet Union decided to withdraw the missiles is, however, less clear.

To many analysts of the crisis—particularly to analysts within the American military establishment—the answer is straightforward. The United States possessed overwhelming strategic and tactical superiority. Tactically, American ships, planes, and manpower were sufficient for any possible action in the Caribbean. Strategically, U.S. capability could pose a credible threat of nuclear holocaust to the Soviet Union. Because of this overwhelming strategic and tactical superiority, once the United States credibly communicated its determination to have the missiles withdrawn, the outcome was certain. The president's statement on October 22 and the blockade set in boldface the firm American commitment to force withdrawal of the missiles. All that remained was for the Soviet Union to calculate its remaining move and withdraw.

This explanation has been refined by a number of strategic analysts of the Soviet withdrawal. Thomas Schelling's analysis of these events singles out the blockade as a successful "compellant threat," after earlier "deterrent threats" had failed to prevent Soviet nuclearization of Cuba.¹⁰⁷ The blockade, writes Alexander George, would "impress the Soviet leader with Kennedy's resoluteness, convince Khrushchev that he had grossly miscalculated, and give him an opportunity to resolve the crisis peacefully And coupled with the buildup of U.S. military forces in the Caribbean, a blockade might generate sufficient pressure and bargaining leverage to induce Khrushchev to agree to a formula for withdrawing the missiles on terms acceptable to Kennedy."¹⁰⁸ Perhaps the most careful, sustained strategic analysis was provided by Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter:

What was threatened was a local nonnuclear action, a measure of very limited violence, only the boarding of ships. On the staircase of ascending steps in the use of force, there would have been many landings, many decision points, at which either side could choose between climbing higher or moving down. The United

States nuclear retaliatory force would have made a Soviet missile strike against the United States catastrophic for Russia.¹⁰⁹

Why did the Soviet Union withdraw the missiles? "*Chairman Khrushchev stepped down to avoid a clash of conventional forces in which he would have lost. To avoid this level of loss, he would have had irresponsibly to risk very much higher levels.*"¹¹⁰

The major problem with this explanation of Soviet withdrawal of the missiles lies in its focus on the *blockade* as the sufficient demonstration of U.S. determination. Did the blockade work? Or did it instead fail in just the way that many of its opponents had predicted? For, after all, what did the blockade have to do with the missiles already on the island of Cuba and rapidly approaching operational readiness? The blockade exhibited U.S. willingness to escalate this crisis to the point of risking a local, nonnuclear naval encounter—with all the possible diplomatic ramifications of such a confrontation. It forced Khrushchev to choose among three alternatives: (1) avoid a showdown by keeping Soviet vessels out of the area; (2) submit to the blockade by permitting ships to be stopped and searched; and (3) provoke the United States to a first use of force by defying the blockade. But if he chose the first, why could he not also proceed to complete the 24 MRBM launch sites, with their 36 missiles and 6 training missiles, 42 in all, that were already present in Cuba?

Indeed, was this not precisely what happened? The Soviet tanker *Bucharest*, which obviously could not be carrying outlawed contraband, was allowed to cross the blockade after identifying herself. An East German passenger ship was also allowed to proceed. A Soviet-chartered Lebanese ship, the *Marucla*, which carried only trucks, sulfur, and spare parts submitted to being stopped and searched. (But a Soviet-chartered Swedish ship defied the blockade and steamed through, and the U.S. chose not to shoot.) Soviet dry cargo ships steaming toward Cuba stopped and turned around, including the ships the Americans thought were probably carrying weapons. Construction of the medium-range missiles in Cuba rushed feverishly toward completion, and they were ready for action by October 27. The facts would seem to belie claims that the Soviets withdrew the missiles because of the blockade alone.

President Kennedy's announcement of the blockade emphasized that it was an *initial* step. No attempt was made to disguise the massive buildup of more than 200,000 invasion troops in Florida. Hundreds of U.S. tactical fighters moved to airports within easy striking distance of

targets in Cuba. On Saturday night, October 27, McNamara called to active duty 24 troop-carrier squadrons of the Air Force Reserve, approximately 14,000 men. Thus the blockade was but the first step in a series of moves that threatened air strike or invasion.

The Kremlin deliberations began with news of the impending Kennedy speech. Not yet knowing what Kennedy would say, Khrushchev feared the worst. He thought the Americans might declare a blockade and then do nothing, but was very worried that they would just attack Cuba. Khrushchev speculated about how the Soviet government would react to such an attack. It might turn the nuclear weapons over to Cuban control and let them respond. But, he assured his colleagues, he would not let Castro threaten America with the MRBMs.¹¹¹ In such a case, of course, an American air strike would have been effectively uncontested.

After the worried deliberations about what Kennedy might do, news of his speech and the announced blockade was greeted not with fear, but with relief. From Washington, Dobrynin reported the American move as a general effort to reverse a slide in world power away from the U.S., reflecting fears about Berlin. He warned that the Americans were preparing for a real test of strength. He then recommended that Moscow threaten a move against Berlin, starting with a ground blockade and "leaving out for the time being air routes so as not to give grounds for a quick confrontation." Yet Dobrynin added that Moscow should not hurry to do this, "since an extreme aggravation of the situation, it goes without saying, would not be in our interests."¹¹² The Soviet leadership was heartened that the Americans had not attacked Cuba. They considered the blockade a weaker response that left room for political maneuver. So the next day they issued a flat, unyielding response to Kennedy's demands.

As Kennedy and his advisers expected, the Soviets did consider a countermove against Berlin. Note the reference to this idea in Dobrynin's cable from Washington. A deputy foreign minister also advanced the idea of countering the blockade with pressure against West Berlin. Khrushchev, however, appeared to realize he was already in very deep water. One of those present recalls that the idea of a Berlin countermove "provoked a sharp, and I would say violent, reaction by Khrushchev" that he could "do without such advice. . . we had no intention to add fuel to the conflict."¹¹³ In this sense, the Wohlstetters may have been right in singling out the importance of American strategic and tactical superiority. Yet it is clear that other Soviet advisers were ready to consider a move against Berlin.



President Kennedy addresses the nation. Source: John F. Kennedy Library.

Khrushchev did order many, though not all, Soviet ships to turn around. Others apparently were left to probe American resolve. Khrushchev's message to Kennedy on October 24 was defiant. In that letter Khrushchev said he would tell Soviet captains to ignore the American quarantine. Khrushchev had also called publicly for a summit meeting with Kennedy.

By the next morning, October 25, Khrushchev had switched from the defiant attitude of the previous day to a tone of conciliation, at least in the deliberation with his colleagues in the governing Presidium. He said that he did not want to trade "caustic remarks" any longer with Kennedy. Instead, he wanted to try to resolve the crisis. He was ready, he said, to "dismantle the missiles to make Cuba into a zone of peace." He suggested the terms, "Give us a pledge not to invade Cuba, and we will remove the missiles." He was also prepared to allow United Nations inspection of the missile sites. First, though, he wanted to be able to "look around" and be sure Kennedy really would not yield.¹¹⁴

During the day, the Soviet government presumably received news that the Americans had allowed the *Bucharest* to pass onward to Cuba.

Khrushchev was stirred to action the next day, October 26, by a series of intelligence reports, some false and based on little more than

rumor, warning of imminent American military action against Cuba.¹¹⁵ Khrushchev promptly made several moves. He sent instructions to accept UN Secretary General U Thant's proposal for avoiding a confrontation at the quarantine line, thereby promising to keep Soviet ships away from this line. He also dictated a long personal letter to Kennedy suggesting a peaceful resolution of the crisis. In the letter, he stated that if the U.S. promised not to invade Cuba, "the necessity for the presence of our military specialists in Cuba would disappear."¹¹⁶

Kennedy and his colleagues hypothesized that these various hints about a possible trade of the missiles for a noninvasion pledge of Cuba indicated that Khrushchev had made the fundamental decision not to risk a military confrontation in order to keep the missiles in Cuba. On the other hand, Khrushchev had given Kennedy a hint of a deal, not a concrete offer. Also, by keeping the correspondence private, he had hidden his tentative move from Castro. Therefore, he might be continuing the delaying tactics he had mentioned to the Presidium on October 25, while Soviet military activity in Cuba rushed to complete the missiles and ready them for action.

For reasons that are still obscure, Khrushchev came to a judgment by the next morning, October 27, that the Americans could be pushed harder. Perhaps he misjudged U.S. resolve due to the way the Americans were enforcing, and failing to enforce, the quarantine. Khrushchev's son said his father felt obliged to send at least one ship through (the *Bucharest*) and was pleasantly surprised when the Americans let it through. Soviet ambassador to Cuba, Alexeev, later commented that the Americans had really just established a paper blockade since clearly some ships were crossing the line without effect.¹¹⁷ American officials were quite worried about whether their selective enforcement of the quarantine was sending mixed or weak messages to Moscow. How Khrushchev or any of his advisers actually perceived matters at the time is unclear.

Khrushchev convened the Presidium and explained that he thought the Americans would no longer dare to attack Cuba. "It is necessary to take into consideration that the United States did not attack Cuba." Five days had passed since Kennedy's speech and nothing had happened. "To my mind they are not ready to do it now." There was no guarantee against an American attack, so Khrushchev would make another, more concrete offer that actually acknowledged the presence of missiles in Cuba. But he would add missiles in Turkey to the bargain. With that "we would win," he said.¹¹⁸

Just as there is little evidence to explain why Khrushchev reversed his assessment of American intentions, there is also little evidence to

explain why Khrushchev now chose to add Turkey to the bargaining. Though talk of Turkey was in the air, a subject of media speculation, the Jupiter missiles in Turkey had not actually been a topic, Fursenko and Naftali point out, in any of the previous Presidium discussions during the crisis. No one had suggested that getting the obsolete missiles out of the way was an important goal.

Had Khrushchev included the Turkey idea in his private letter of October 26, the American reaction to the new proposal might have been different. Neither Kennedy nor his advisers had much use for the Jupiter missiles. Yet bringing the idea in at this point raised some obvious questions. Would the Americans not perceive this as a change in the Soviet negotiating position, plainly inconsistent with the October 26 letter? Surely any thoughtful analyst would have suggested that there was at least a good chance that Washington would, rather than accepting the offer, instead doubt Soviet interest in a negotiated settlement, thereby increasing the likelihood of American military action. There is no evidence that the Soviet government considered this danger. One insider simply remembers that Khrushchev's proposal of October 27 was "advanced in the hope of further bargaining."¹¹⁹

Khrushchev then further reduced the chance of success for his latest initiative by deciding to make his offer public. This made American acceptance of it extremely unlikely, especially given the implications for NATO of such a public trade. A public deal might save face for Khrushchev, but no face would be saved if the Americans rejected it—which almost any analyst should have predicted would happen. The Turks, whose attitude no one in Moscow seems to have considered, publicly rejected the trade just as the Americans started to discuss it. Castro certainly expected the Americans to reject such a deal, and the Soviet ambassador to Havana reported to Moscow that Castro was comforted by that very point.¹²⁰

There is no evidence that Khrushchev analyzed this point either, or that any member of the Presidium chose to mention it. One of Khrushchev's staff remembered that the new proposal was broadcast over the radio in order to save time in transmitting it, and that "nobody foresaw that by making public the Turkish angle of the deal we created additional difficulties to the White House."¹²¹

Perhaps, as some Americans in Washington thought, Khrushchev's actions were not as thoughtless as they seem. Perhaps Khrushchev offered such a deal in order to stalemate the negotiations, not further them. The position was well designed for public consumption, not for American acceptance. The Soviets could then have hoped that the

Americans might even back down, by accepting prolonged and fruitless negotiations. There was, though, still the risk to be considered that, instead, the Americans might escalate with new military action. This was, in fact, the way practically all of Kennedy's advisers did react.

Warning signs of imminent combat in Cuba arrived in Moscow during the day of October 27, to wake Khrushchev from his apparent complacency. A message arrived from Castro to Khrushchev. In it, Castro asserted that an American attack in the next 24 to 72 hours "is almost inevitable," probably a massive air strike but possibly an invasion. If the Americans did invade, Castro urged Khrushchev to consider "elimination of such a danger," plainly referring to use of Soviet nuclear weapons against the Americans. "However difficult and horrifying this decision may be," Castro wrote, "there is, I believe, no other recourse."¹²² Air defenses in Cuba began shooting at American reconnaissance aircraft. And an American U-2 was shot down by Soviet SAMs in Cuba, and its pilot killed.

Late in the afternoon of October 27, in Moscow, Khrushchev learned that the Americans had immediately knocked down his public proposal with a press statement of their own. Khrushchev was reportedly quite worried about the shootdown of the U-2. He was certainly a bit unnerved by the message that had come in from Castro that had seemed to urge him to prepare for using nuclear weapons against America. A few days later, in another message to Castro, Khrushchev referred to this "very alarming" message in which "you proposed that we be the first to carry out a nuclear strike against the enemy's territory." "Naturally," Khrushchev added, "you understand where that would lead us. It would not be a simple strike, but the start of a thermonuclear world war."¹²³

A public message from Kennedy to Khrushchev arrived late on Saturday evening, October 27, in Moscow. It laid out the deal that would entail the verified withdrawal of Soviet "offensive weapons" in exchange for the noninvasion pledge.

The American government was conscious that it was sending a set of signals to Khrushchev. Rusk was explicit about this. On the evening of October 27, he listed "seven things that have happened today" that "are building up the pressures on Khrushchev with an impact that we can live with." The seven were: (1) a public White House statement in the morning that had rejected the Turkey-Cuba offer broadcast by Khrushchev; (2) a message to the United Nations clarifying just where the U.S. would intercept further Soviet ships bound for Cuba; (3) an afternoon announcement from the Pentagon insisting that surveil-

lance of Cuba would continue despite the attacks on American aircraft; (4) a short message to the UN secretary general giving a negative answer to Khrushchev's proposed trade; (5) Kennedy's public letter sent to Khrushchev late in the afternoon (Washington time) giving, in effect, a positive reply to Khrushchev's private suggestion of the day before, offering a pledge not to invade Cuba in exchange for removal of the missiles; (6) McNamara's press conference calling up reserve air squadrons to further ready an invasion; and (7) a planned warning to the United Nations about the approach of a Soviet ship toward the American blockade line.¹²⁴

Khrushchev opened the Presidium session on Sunday morning of October 28 with yet another about-face in his assessment of the American danger. This time he told his Presidium colleagues that they were "face to face with the danger of war and of nuclear catastrophe, with the possible result of destroying the human race." He went on: "In order to save the world, we must retreat."¹²⁵

In sum, the blockade did not change Khrushchev's mind. Only when coupled with the threat of further action—action in the form of alternatives rejected during the first week for reasons that have already been discussed—did it succeed in forcing Soviet withdrawal of the missiles. Without the threat of air strike or invasion, the blockade alone would not have forced the removal of the missiles already present.

There is a related explanation according to which Khrushchev yielded both to a stick and to a carrot. In delivering Kennedy's letter to Dobrynin on the night of October 27, Robert Kennedy made the American threat of further action quite explicit, and said little time was left. Dobrynin asked about the Jupiters. Following instructions prompted by a suggestion from Rusk, Robert Kennedy said there could be no deal on this point, since it involved NATO. But he said he could privately assure the Soviets that the Jupiters were going to be withdrawn in four or five months.¹²⁶ The clever aspect of Rusk's idea was that this offer avoided any negotiation about the reciprocal scope or timetable of a trade, while getting the Jupiter issue off the table as an excuse for delay. It had been the form of Khrushchev's offer that had been so pernicious, more than the substance.¹²⁷ The urgency in Robert Kennedy's warning about imminent military action was real. Robert Kennedy would not have uttered such a threat if he thought his brother would make him a liar. President Kennedy himself reflected, on October 29, that "we had decided Saturday night [October 27] to begin this air strike on Tuesday [October 30]. And it may have been one of the reasons why the Russians finally did this [giving in]."¹²⁸

In any case, apparently, Khrushchev's decision to blink was not based on news of either the stick or the carrot in Robert Kennedy's conversation with Dobrynin. According to Fursenko and Naftali, it was only after Khrushchev made his declaration to the Politburo that news came in of the cable from Dobrynin in Washington reporting on the discussion with Robert Kennedy in bleak, ominous terms. The offer on the Jupiters, such as it was, caused no relief. That signal was overwhelmed in the general tone of threat and urgency which just reinforced and accelerated the decision Khrushchev had already made. The staffer who read a summary of the cable to the Presidium remembered how the "entire tenor of the words by the President's brother, as they were relayed by Anatoly Dobrynin, prompted the conclusion that the time of reckoning had come." Khrushchev later told Castro that his warning of an imminent American attack had been confirmed by other sources and that he had hurried to prevent it.¹²⁹

Khrushchev withdrew the Soviet missiles not because of the blockade, but because of the threat of further action. The middle road—that is, the blockade—may have provided time for Soviets to adjust to the fact of American determination to withdraw the missiles. But it also left room for the Soviet Union to bring the missiles to operational readiness. What narrowed that room was Khrushchev's belief that he faced a clear, urgent threat that America was about to move up the ladder of escalation. In this ladder, America benefited from its advantages in *both* its nuclear and its conventional forces. As McNamara testified after the crisis: "I realize that there is a kind of chicken-and-the-egg debate going on about which was preeminent. To me that is like trying to argue about which blade of the scissors really cut the paper."¹³⁰

NOTES

1. This chapter presents a Model I analyst's explanation of the central puzzles in the missile crisis. The purpose is to illustrate a strong, characteristic classical account.
2. This piece of conventional wisdom—namely, that the Soviet Union did not station medium-range and long-range missiles outside the Soviet Union—played an important part in establishing the climate of opinion and consequently the subsequent surprise. See Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 670–71, 673.
3. On Dobrynin's instructions, see Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence* (New York: Random House, 1995), pp. 69, 74. On Dobrynin's conversation with Robert Kennedy, see *ibid.*, pp. 68–69; and Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A*

- Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968), pp. 24–27. For the text of the September 4 statement, see Department of State, *Bulletin*, 24 September 1962, p. 450. For Dobrynin's meeting with Sorensen, see Sorensen to the Files, "Conversation with Ambassador Dobrynin," 6 September 1962, John F. Kennedy Library (hereinafter JFKL), Sorensen Papers, Classified Subject Files, 1961–64, Cuba, General—1962; and Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 68.
4. The full eleven-page text, as translated, can be found in JFKL, National Security Files (hereinafter NSF), Box 36, Cuba, General—9/62. The quotation is from the excerpt of the statement published in "Text of Soviet Statement Saying That Any U.S. Attack on Cuba Would Mean War," *New York Times*, 12 September 1962, p. 16 (emphasis added).
 5. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy*, 1962, pp. 674–75.
 6. Khrushchev to Kennedy, 28 September 1962, in JFKL, NSF, Countries Series, USSR, Subjects, Khrushchev Correspondence, Vol. III-B—9/15/62–10/24/62.
 7. For decision makers of the time, this prescription was exemplified by the quoted passage from Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1957), p. 5 ff.
 8. This prescription was also known to American officials, having been prominently developed by Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), chapter 3.
 9. Among the best summaries of more recent prescriptions for successful deterrence, see Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp. 519–86; Alexander L. George, "Theory and Practice," in *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, 2d ed., ed. Alexander L. George and William E. Simons (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 16–20.
 10. In 1950, William Langer and Kent headed what became called the Office of National Estimates. During the 1970s, it was renamed and is, in its current incarnation, called the National Intelligence Council. The quotation about Kent is from Donald P. Steury, "Introduction," in *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates: Collected Essays*, ed. Donald P. Steury (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1994), p. ix.
 11. U.S. Intelligence Board, "The Military Buildup in Cuba," Special National Intelligence Estimate 85-3-62, 19 September 1962, in CIA History Staff, *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis 1962* (Washington, DC: CIA, 1992), pp. 92–93.
 12. Sherman Kent, "A Crucial Estimate Relived," originally published as a classified article in *Studies in Intelligence*, Spring 1964, published in Steury, *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates*, pp. 184–85. For an extended presentation of Kent's views on the craft of assessment, see Sherman Kent, *Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy*, rev. ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966). A brief but insightful discussion of the craft by one of Kent's successors is Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Peering Into the Future," *Foreign Affairs* 77 (July/August 1994): 82–93.
 13. Kent, "A Crucial Estimate Relived," p. 185. The argument about worst-case estimation is on pp. 181–82.
 14. Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 88 (from meeting at 6:30 P.M. on October 16). All quotations are from the second (or later) printing of the hardcover edition of this book. The second, and subsequent, printings contain a number of small corrections and added speaker identifications. May and Zelikow were able to solve various puzzles in the transcriptions as the first printing was going to press.
 15. *Ibid.*, pp. 89, 107.
 16. CIA, "Probable Soviet MRBM Sites in Cuba," 16 October 1962, in *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, ed. Mary S. McAuliffe (Washington, DC: CIA History Staff, 1992), p. 141.
 17. Statement by the Soviet Government, 23 October 1962, in David L. Larson, 2d ed., *The 'Cuban Crisis' of 1962: Selected Documents, Chronology and Bibliography* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986), p. 72.
 18. Khrushchev dictated his memoirs after his fall from power and these were smuggled to the West. These reminiscences have been published in three volumes: Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, trans. and ed. Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970); Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament*, trans. and ed. Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974); and Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Glasnost Tapes*, trans. and ed. Jerrold Schecter with Vyacheslav Luchkov (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990). The quote is from Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers* [1970], p. 493.
 19. Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble": *Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958–1964* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), pp. 11–39.
 20. *Ibid.*, pp. 51–53.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
 22. Khrushchev message to Kennedy, 18 April 1961, in Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963* [hereinafter *FRUS 1961–1963*], vol. 6, *Kennedy-Khrushchev Exchanges* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996), p. 8.
 23. Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers* [1970], p. 493.
 24. Robert E. Quirk, *Fidel Castro* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), pp. 400–01.
 25. The history of Operation Mongoose is documented in *FRUS 1961–1963*, vol. 10. Evidence on assassination efforts against Castro is canvassed in Edwards to Robert Kennedy, "Arthur James Balletti et al," 14 May 1962 in *ibid.*, pp. 807–08 (and see note 1, p. 807, by the editors); Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (also known as the Church Committee after its chairman, Senator Frank Church),

- Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, 94th Cong., 1st sess., November 1975; and John Ranelagh, *The Agency: The Rise and Decline of the CIA*, rev. ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), pp. 336–45, 355–58, 384–89; some additional details are assembled, without much discrimination, in Seymour Hersh, *The Dark Side of Camelot* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1997), pp. 187–221, 268–93. Certainly after 1961 there is no direct evidence of White House sponsorship for the continuing desultory efforts of the relevant CIA official, William Harvey, to find someone to assassinate Castro. However, Hersh argues that Robert Kennedy demanded the services of a CIA agent named Charles Ford, whose job was to visit Mafia leaders around the country to see if they had any remaining intelligence contacts that could be useful in Cuba. The scale of the activity was so low that CIA director John McCone was kept in the dark about what was going on, so low that there is also little evidence to link any real CIA-sponsored action with a known Soviet or Cuban intelligence report that got the attention of Soviet leaders, amid the noise of so many other plots—real and spurious.
26. If Soviet or Cuban intelligence had really penetrated Cuban exile groups in March–April 1962, they would have heard doubts about Kennedy's willingness to back any uprising with American force. E.g., Nestor Carbonell, *And the Russians Stayed: The Sovietization of Cuba* (New York: William Morrow, 1989), pp. 208–09. On March 29, the head of the Cuban government-in-exile, Jose Miro Cardona, met at the White House with McGeorge Bundy. The Cubans pleaded for enough help to invade Cuba and overthrow Castro. Bundy told them that, if the U.S. would support such an action it had to be decisive and complete. That could not happen without the open involvement of U.S. armed forces. "This would mean open war against Cuba which in the U.S. judgment was not advisable in the present international situation." Cardona did not like this answer. Memcon of Meeting between Cardona and Bundy, 29 March 1962, *FRUS 1961–1963*, vol. 10, *Cuba 1961–1962* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), p. 778. Cardona then met with Kennedy on April 10. Kennedy, like Bundy, specifically rebuffed Cardona's pleas for commitment to an invasion. Passavoy to Record, "Topics Discussed during Meeting of Dr. Miro Cardona with the President," 25 April 1962, and Goodwin to President Kennedy, both in JFKL, NSF, Box 45, Cuba: Subjects, Miro Cardona, Material Sent to Palm Beach. The State Department officer running the Cuban desk wrote on April 19 of the "deep sense of frustration and impatience" in the Cuban exile community "over what it considers 'inactivity' regarding the overthrow of the Castro regime." The exile leaders "have become the objects of considerable criticism for having failed to convince the United States to embark on a military operations program." Cardona was debating whether to resign. Hurwitch to Martin, "The Cuban Exile Community, the Cuban Revolutionary Council, and Dr. Miro Cardona," 19 April 1962, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, vol. 10, p. 797.
 27. See Fursenko and Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble", pp. 149–60.
 28. Khrushchev, *Last Testament*, p. 511; Fursenko and Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble", p. 160.
 29. In the year after Escalante's removal in 1962, up to 80 percent of the membership, in some regions, was expelled from the ruling communist party. Jorge Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 210–18.
 30. Fursenko and Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble", pp. 169–70, indicate that fears about Chinese influence in Cuba were more salient than news about the American military exercises in spurring a final approval of the military aid package for Cuba.
 31. See the 1992 recollection of Castro at an oral history conference in Havana, *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse*, ed. James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn, and David A. Welch (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), pp. 85–86; the 1989 recollection of Aragones at another oral history conference, in Moscow, in *Back to the Brink: Proceedings of the Moscow Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis, January 27–28, 1989*, ed. Bruce J. Allyn, James G. Blight, and David A. Welch, Harvard CSIA Occasional Paper no. 9 (Lanham: University Press of America, 1992), p. 52; and Anatoli I. Gribkov, "The View from Moscow and Havana," in Anatoli I. Gribkov and William Y. Smith, *Operation ANADYR: U.S. and Soviet Generals Recount the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Chicago: Edition q, 1994), p. 23.
 32. See James G. Hershberg, "Before 'The Missiles of October': Did Kennedy Plan a Military Strike Against Cuba?" in *The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited*, ed. James A. Nathan (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 250–51.
 33. Fursenko and Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble", pp. 178–79.
 34. Reprinted, significantly, in *Pravda*, February 26, 1962 and quoted in Yuri Pavlov, *Soviet-Cuban Alliance: 1959–1991* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1994), p. 37.
 35. See Fursenko and Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble", pp. 179–80; Alexander Alexeev's 1989 recollections in *Back to the Brink*: pp. 150–151; Alexeev at the 1992 conference in Havana, pp. 77–78; and in *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn'*, July 1992, p. 54. On the May 21 Defense Council session and the preparation of the formal document for approval on May 24, see the account of one of the responsible drafting officers who reviewed the records of the two meetings. Gribkov, "The View from Moscow and Havana," pp. 7–10, 14.
 36. See the 1989 recollections from the member of Castro's Secretariat, Emilio Aragones (the other five members were Fidel Castro, Raul Castro, Che Guevara, Osvaldo Dorticos, and Blas Roca) and from the other Cuban official, Jorge Risquet, in *Back to the Brink*, pp. 51, 26. Their accounts are consistent with those of Castro himself at the Havana conference in 1992, see *Cuba on the Brink*, pp. 197–98; and those of Alexeev, see *Back to the Brink*, pp. 151–52. On Cuban reluctance, see also Pavlov, *Soviet-Cuban Alliance*, pp. 38–40. See also Blight, Allyn, and Welch's discussion of Castro's real motives for accepting the missiles in *Cuba on the Brink*, pp. 345–47.

37. Gribkov, "The View from Moscow and Havana," p. 13.
38. May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 92.
39. CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate, "Major Consequences of Certain U.S. Courses of Action on Cuba," SNIE 11-19-62, 20 October 1962, in *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, p. 214; the Rusk quotation is from a discussion with congressional leaders, October 22, in May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 255.
40. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., pbk. ed. *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 728.
41. Henry Kissinger, *The Necessity for Choice* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 1.
42. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 742.
43. May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 59.
44. Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960).
45. For a good analysis of both the apparent potential gain to the U.S. from striking first as well as the more cautious way in which these matters were actually evaluated in the Kennedy administration, see Richard K. Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1987), pp. 159–179. The top secret U.S. contingency plan for Berlin, its seriousness wonderfully disguised by the ridiculous code name "Poodle Blanket," assumed a first phase of diplomatic exchanges and a military buildup. If the Soviets persisted in blockading Berlin, the West would try to use conventional military forces to break through. If Soviet forces resisted, defeating the Western effort with their larger conventional forces, the U.S. planned for "the onset of nuclear military action" starting with limited uses of nuclear weapons in order to signal the extreme gravity of the situation. For overviews, see National Security Action Memorandum No. 109, "U.S. Policy on Military Actions in a Berlin Crisis, 'Poodle Blanket,'" 23 October 1961, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, vol. 14, *Berlin Crisis 1961–1962* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1994); and Bundy to President Kennedy, "NATO Contingency Planning for Berlin (BERCON/MARCON Plans) and the Conceptual Framework of Poodle Blanket," 20 July 1962, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, vol. 15, *Berlin Crisis 1962–1963* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1994), pp. 232–34.
46. For a classic summary of strategic thinking at the time, see Thomas C. Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).
47. This point is handled well in William Curti Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 157–66.
48. See Kevin C. Ruffner, ed., *CORONA: America's First Satellite Program* (Washington, DC: CIA History Staff, 1995) and Jerrold L. Schechter and Peter S. Deriabin, *The Spy Who Saved the World: How a Soviet Colonel Changed the Course of the Cold War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992).

49. On the Gilpatric speech, see Michael R. Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev 1960–1963* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 328–31.
50. McCone to his deputy, Marshall Carter, 10 September 1962, in *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, p. 59. McCone was then following the issue every day while on a honeymoon trip to the south of France. He had begun mentioning his fears at White House meetings in August.
51. May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 100.
52. Rusk in a meeting on Monday afternoon, October 22, in *ibid.*, p. 236. The expert judgment included in briefings sent out the previous day for other key leaders was that "sites now identified will, when completed, give Soviets total of 36 launchers and 72 missiles. This compares with 60–65 ICBM launchers we now estimate to be operational in the USSR." CIA, "Soviet Military Buildup in Cuba," 21 October 1962, in *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, p. 259. The experts had judged "that this threat against the U.S. is approximately one-half the current ICBM missile threat from the USSR." Guided Missile and Astronautics Intelligence Committee, Joint Atomic Energy Intelligence Committee, and National Photographic Interpretation Center, "Supplement 2 to Joint Evaluation of Soviet Missile Threat in Cuba," 21 October 1962, in *ibid.*, p. 262. Rusk probably counted reloads in coming to his figure, but in fact he was close to the mark since the U.S. had overestimated the size of the Soviet ICBM force.
53. See James G. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), p. 238. Khrushchev recounted "a bit lyrically" a story of his conversation with Malinovsky on the shores of the Black Sea in the draft of his letter proposing the dispatch of the missiles to Castro. The story cannot be directly confirmed and neither the draft nor the actual letter are available. A member of Khrushchev's staff at the time, Fyodor Burlatsky, recalls the story from his work in editing the letter. For his recollection of it, at a 1989 conference in Moscow, see Allyn, Blight, and Welch, *Back to the Brink*, p. 46.
54. Dmitri Volkogonov, *Sem Vozhdei* (Seven Leaders), quoted in Fursenko and Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble," p. 171.
55. Malinovsky quoted in Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, p. 332; and Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 258. On Khrushchev's prior resumption of testing in the fall of 1961, see Viktor Adamsky and Yuri Smirnov, "Moscow's Biggest Bomb: The 50-Megaton Test of October 1961," *Bulletin of the Cold War International History Project*, No. 4 (1994), p. 3. On the Alsop interview and Kremlin reaction, see Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, pp. 370–72; Sergo Mikoyan's recollection in *On the Brink*, p. 243.
56. After the Soviets resumed above-ground testing in September 1961, the U.S. had resumed underground testing at its Nevada test site. The issue in the spring of 1962 was above-ground testing, which was much more controversial and garnered much more press attention. For Rusk's report on his talks with Gromyko, see Minutes of Meeting of the National Security Council, 28

- March 1962, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, vol. 7, *Arms Control and Disarmament* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1995), p. 411; see also Memcon of Meeting between Rusk and Dobrynin, 23 April 1962, in *ibid.*, p. 443. The U.S. nuclear test series, Dominic I, involved 36 detonations in the Pacific, in the vicinity of Christmas Island and Johnston Island, beginning on April 25. The Soviets followed with a further series of their own atmospheric tests, beginning in August 1962.
57. The best study of the Jupiter deployment is Philip Nash, *The Other Missiles of October: Eisenhower, Kennedy, and the Jupiters, 1957–1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); see also Barton J. Bernstein, "Reconsidering the Missile Crisis: Dealing with the Problems of the American Jupiters in Turkey," in Nathan, ed., *The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited*, p. 55–67.
58. Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers* [1970], p. 494.
59. Oleg Troyanovsky, "The Caribbean Crisis: A View from the Kremlin," *International Affairs* (Moscow), April–May 1992, pp. 147, 148.
60. May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 176.
61. Gribkov, "The View from Moscow and Havana," p. 13. For the Soviet estimate that they had 20 operational ICBMs and that therefore the missiles in Cuba would add greatly to their ability to strike the United States, see the statement of General Dimitri Volkogonov (who had examined some classified archives beforehand) at the 1989 Moscow conference, in *Back to the Brink*, p. 53. Volkogonov's assertion of 20 ICBMs is consistent with American estimates in September 1961 that the Soviet Union would have 10–25 launchers from which ICBMs could be fired against the U.S. "and that this force level will not increase markedly during the months immediately ahead." National Intelligence Estimate, "Strength and Deployment of Soviet Long Range Ballistic Missile Forces," NIE 11/8-1/61, available from CIA History Office. The next such national estimate in July 1962 thought the number of operational Soviet ICBMs could then be as high as 75. Raymond Garthoff, a former senior intelligence analyst and State Department official, later concluded, from subsequent American observations, that the Soviets actually had about 40 operational ICBMs at some point in 1962. Depending on the time at which the measure is taken and the definition of "operational," Garthoff's estimate might not differ materially from Volkogonov's. See *Back to the Brink*, p. 134; as well as Raymond L. Garthoff, rev. ed. *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1989), pp. 20–21, along with Garthoff's memos written during the crisis reproduced on pp. 197–98, 202–03; and, for the most extensive analysis, Raymond L. Garthoff, *Intelligence Assessment and Policymaking: A Decision Point in the Kennedy Administration* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1984).
62. Gribkov, "The View from Moscow and Havana," pp. 27–28, 43.
63. McCone made no effort to censor the September 19 estimate by Kent's panel, but he thought that, "As an alternative I can see that an offensive Soviet Cuban base will provide Soviets with most important and effective trading position in connection with all other critical areas and hence they might take an unexpected risk in order to establish such a position." McCone to Carter, 20 September 1962, in *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, p. 95.
64. May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 106. After Kennedy left the meeting, Under Secretary of State George Ball mentioned to others that the State Department experts disagreed about whether Khrushchev had thought this was a low-risk operation. Some thought Khrushchev had thought he was taking a low risk and just miscalculated. Others, notably Llewellyn Thompson, thought the Soviet leader had knowingly taken a very high risk.
65. First Rusk offered the missile power hypothesis, citing McCone: "Mr. Khrushchev may have in mind... that he knows that we have a substantial nuclear superiority, but he also knows that we don't really live under fear of his nuclear weapons to the extent that he has to live under fear of ours." Then Rusk added the quoted point about the relationship to Berlin. *Ibid.*, pp. 60–61.
66. Khrushchev to Kennedy, 9 November 1961, in *FRUS Berlin Crisis 1962–1963*, vol. 15, p. 579; see also the account of West Germany's ambassador at the time to Moscow, Hans S. Kroll, *Lebenserinnerungen eines Botschafters* (Köln: Kiepenheuer and Witsch, 1967), pp. 524–27.
67. Khrushchev to Kennedy, [apparently sent on about 3 July 1962], in *FRUS 1961–1963*, vol. 15, pp. 208–09; Bohlen to Rusk, 6 July 1962, p. 213; for Thompson's puzzle, see Moscow 187, 20 July 1962, *ibid.*, p. 234; and see Secto 50 (memcon of meeting between Rusk and Gromyko, 24 July 1962), 25 July 62, *ibid.*, pp. 248–249. For Dobrynin's comment on Thompson, see Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 63. By this time the sense of impending crisis was becoming general, and America's allies were also anxious to consider contingency plans. See Weiss to Johnson, "Berlin," 11 July 1962, and Secto 13 (Rusk to Kennedy and Ball), 22 July 1962 in *FRUS 1961–1963*, vol. 15, pp. 213–14, 236–37.
68. See Moscow 225, 25 July 1962; see also Moscow 228, 26 July 1962; and Copenhagen 76 (Thompson to Rusk), in *ibid.*, pp. 252–255; for Bundy, see Bundy to Sorensen, "Berlin," 23 August 1962, in *ibid.*, pp. 284–285; on the Sorensen communications see Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, pp. 67–68.
69. Memorandum of Conversation between Udall and Khrushchev, Petsunda, 6 September 1962, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, vol. 15, p. 309.
70. Khrushchev to Kennedy, 28 September 1962, in *FRUS 1961–1963*, vol. 6, *Kennedy-Khrushchev Exchanges* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996), p. 161; Memorandum of Conversation for October 18 meeting between Kennedy and Gromyko, "Germany and Berlin; Possible Visit by Khrushchev," in *FRUS 1961–1963*, vol. 15, pp. 371–72, 375.
71. For Thompson's comment on October 18, see May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 139. For Kennedy's October 22 conversation with Prime Minister Harold Macmillan (drawn from the British stenographic record), see *ibid.*, pp. 285–86. Thompson's conclusion, summarized in writing for the benefit of overseas posts, was that, "When Soviet action in arming Cuba with offensive

- nuclear missiles became evident, it was because of developments [on Berlin over the summer and fall] that this Government tended to believe Soviet action was probably primarily geared to showdown on Berlin, intended to be timed with Khrushchev's arrival in U.S. and completion or installation of these missiles in Cuba." State telegram, 24 October 1962, in *FRUS Berlin Crisis 1962-1963*, vol. 15, pp. 397-399. British experts in the Foreign Office's Northern Department submitted a very similar opinion. "Yet if Khrushchev was to bring things to a head fairly soon over Berlin something must be done urgently to rectify imbalance if Soviets would be negotiating politically in an inferior military position. Khrushchev may well have calculated that once Cuban missile complex completed he could frighten Americans off taking determined action in Berlin by pointing to their own vulnerability to attack from his Cuban base and thus obtain heavy leverage in negotiations on Berlin which he has been planning for the end of year." London 1696, 26 October 1962, conveying the estimate that had been provided to the British Cabinet's Joint Intelligence Committee, in National Security Archive, Cuban Missile Crisis Files, 1992 Releases Box.
72. The comment was in his briefing to congressional leaders on October 22. May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 256.
 73. Kennedy elaborated this understanding of Khrushchev's strategy at length on at least four occasions, to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on October 19 and on October 22 in different discussions with the National Security Council, congressional leaders, and Macmillan. For the quotations from the October 19 meeting with the JCS see *ibid.*, p. 176. For the last quotation, from the October 22 meeting with congressional leaders, see *ibid.*, p. 256.
 74. Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 63.
 75. James Richter and an older account, from Michel Tatu, are quite good on Khrushchev's dilemmas and need to press forward on Berlin, given his increasing exposure to political enemies both at home and throughout the Communist world. For more on Khrushchev's difficult domestic and international position by late 1961, see James G. Richter, *Khrushchev's Double Bind: International Pressures and Domestic Coalition Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), pp. 142-47; Michel Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin* (New York: Viking, 1968), pp. 148-214; and Robert M. Slusser, *The Berlin Crisis of 1961: Soviet-American Relations and the Struggle for Power in the Kremlin, June-November 1961* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).
 76. Khrushchev to Kennedy, 13 December 1961, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, vol. 14, pp. 683-84, 690.
 77. See, based on research in East German archives, Michael Lemke, *Die Berlinkrise 1958 bis 1963: Interessen und Handlungsspielräume der SED im Ost-West Konflikt* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995), pp. 186-90.
 78. Salinger was reciprocating the January meeting with Kennedy by Khrushchev's son-in-law, and *Pravda* editor, Alexei Adzhubei. On the meeting, see Pierre Salinger, *With Kennedy* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 225-37; Fursenko and Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble," p. 176-77.
 79. McNamara certainly believed that evident American nuclear superiority was affecting the Berlin diplomacy and keeping the Soviets from returning to direct confrontation. He explained the point to Kennedy in detail. See McNamara to Kennedy, "U.S. and Soviet Military Buildup and Probable Effects on Berlin Situation," 21 June 1962, in *FRUS Berlin Crisis 1962-1963*, vol. 15, pp. 192-95.
 80. Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 52.
 81. Richter, *Khrushchev's Double Bind*, p. 128.
 82. *Ibid.*, p. 150. Richter grasps the significance of Berlin but does not integrate Khrushchev's 1962 moves on Berlin into his account. For a similar conclusion about Khrushchev's domestic and international need for a foreign policy success, but omitting Berlin as the vehicle for it, see Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 58-60. The earlier work by Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, is better on the Berlin dimension, though—lacking evidence—Tatu's formidable analysis had to be mostly speculative. For more evidence on Khrushchev's dilemmas in allocating resources see, in addition to Richter and Tatu, the still-valuable older work by Merle Fainsod, *How Russia Is Ruled*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), esp. pp. 545-58, 611-12.
 83. See Memorandum of Conversation for Meeting between Kennedy and Gromyko, "Cuba," 18 October 1962, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, vol. 11, *Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), pp. 113-14; Gromyko report to Central Committee of the CPSU, 19 October 1962, in "Russian Foreign Ministry Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis," *CWIHP Bulletin*, no. 5 (Spring 1995), 66-67.
 84. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, p. 673.
 85. E.g., Carter to U.S. Intelligence Board, "Evaluation of Offensive Threat to Cuba," 21 October 1962, in *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, p. 237. This judgment was never revised later. The actual missiles for the IRBM launch sites never reached Cuba. They were en route when the American blockaded Cuba and were brought back to the Soviet Union.
 86. Thompson in White House meeting of October 18, in May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 138.
 87. Marshall Carter, in *ibid.*, p. 79.
 88. George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, pp. 537-39. If deterrence is defined as persuading not to initiate an action, then the American efforts can, alternatively, be viewed as a form of coercive diplomacy: persuading an opponent to stop an action short of the presumed goal. George, "Coercive Diplomacy: Definition and Characteristics," in *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, pp. 8-9. The requisites for this most modest form of defensive coercive diplomacy are analogous to those prescribed for effective deterrence.
 89. Andrei Gromyko, "The Caribbean Crisis: On Glasnost Now and Secrecy Then," *Izvestia*, April 15, 1989; Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, pp. 79-80.
 90. See, e.g., President Kennedy's remarks to his National Security Council on October 22 in May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 237.

91. From Kennedy's summary, late in the evening of October 18, of a just-concluded meeting which he knew had not been tape-recorded because it was held in the residential area of the White House to avoid press attention. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
92. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
93. From a taped conversation in the Oval Office on the evening of October 23, in *ibid.*, p. 342. For a more elaborate reconstruction of this exchange (incorrectly dated), see Robert Kennedy, pbk. ed. *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), p. 67.
94. From minutes of the decisive National Security Council meeting on the afternoon of October 20, excerpted in May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 199, from *FRUS 1961-1963*, vol. 11, pp. 126-36.
95. From discussion on evening of October 16, in May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, pp. 82-83. The idea was revived, in a different form, and seriously considered again on October 25-26. Kennedy and his advisers approved a message to Castro, but it had not been delivered by the Brazilian intermediaries when Khrushchev gave in and so the need for such a message passed. See *ibid.*, pp. 458-62 and 462 n. 16.
96. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
97. Discussion on October 18, in *ibid.*, p. 144.
98. On October 18, in *ibid.*, pp. 143 (Ball), 149 (Rusk). Ball had already sent Kennedy a passionate memo making this argument in writing.
99. Bohlen memo of October 17, read aloud and in full by Rusk at White House meeting of October 18, in *ibid.*, p. 130. Bohlen had departed earlier that morning for his highly publicized posting as ambassador to France.
100. *Ibid.*, p. 264.
101. From discussions on October 18 in *ibid.*, p. 138.
102. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
103. Dillon was actually the first to mention the idea, in a memo sent to Kennedy on the night of October 17. C. Douglas Dillon, "Memorandum for the President," reprinted in Laurence Chang and Peter Kornbluh, eds., *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader* (New York: New Press, 1992), pp. 116-18.
104. See May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, pp. 202-03, 208-13, which includes excerpts from the October 21 meeting of the National Security Council drawn from *FRUS 1961-1963*, vol. 11, pp. 141-49.
105. May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 230.
106. Khrushchev to Kennedy, 28 October 1962, in Larson, *The "Cuban Crisis" of 1962*, p. 189.
107. Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 80-83. But Schelling also recognizes the "threat of more isolated action."
108. Alexander L. George, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: Peaceful Resolution Through Coercive Diplomacy," in Alexander L. George and William E. Simons, eds., 2d ed. *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), p. 114.
109. Albert Wohlstetter and Roberta Wohlstetter, *Controlling the Risks in Cuba*, Adelphi Paper no. 17 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1965), p. 16. The Wohlstetters also recognize U.S. willingness to "take the next step if necessary."
110. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
111. Fursenko and Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble," pp. 240-43.
112. Dobrynin to Foreign Ministry, 23 October 1962, in *Bulletin of the Cold War International History Project*, No. 5, Spring 1995, pp. 70-71.
113. Troyanovsky, "The Caribbean Crisis," p. 152.
114. Fursenko and Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble," p. 259.
115. *Ibid.*, pp. 257-58, 260-62.
116. *Ibid.*, p. 263.
117. See Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, p. 115; Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, p. 67, n. 107.
118. Fursenko and Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble," p. 274.
119. Troyanovsky, "The Caribbean Crisis," p. 153.
120. Alexeev to Foreign Ministry, 27 October 1962, in set of documents collected by the Cold War International History Project and translated by the Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard (hereinafter CWIHP/Harvard Collection).
121. Troyanovsky, "The Caribbean Crisis," p. 153.
122. Alexeev to Foreign Ministry, 25 October 1962; Castro to Khrushchev, 26 October 1962, both in CWIHP/Harvard collection.
123. Khrushchev to Castro, 30 October 1962, in released correspondence at JFKL.
124. May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 616.
125. Fursenko and Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble," p. 284.
126. See McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988), pp. 432-34; Robert Kennedy's account of the meeting is in a memo addressed to Rusk, 30 October 1962, in JFKL, President's Office Files; Dobrynin's report on the meeting, in *Bulletin of the Cold War International History Project*, No. 5, Spring 1995, pp. 79-80; Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), pp. 522-523; and May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, pp. 605-09 and nn. 2, 3, 5, and 7.
127. A negotiated trade would have involved delicate, publicized U.S.-Turkish and Soviet-Cuban talks and questions about reciprocal treatment of Soviet bombers in Cuba and U.S. nuclear-capable attack aircraft in Turkey, along with other time-consuming issues. The result, as some Americans feared, could well have been no result at all—completion of the *fait accompli*.
128. May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, p. 656. On the so-called "Cordier maneuver" Kennedy might have planned instead, see *ibid.*, p. 606 n. 3.
129. Fursenko and Naftali, "One Hell of a Gamble," p. 284-86; and Troyanovsky, "The Caribbean Crisis," p. 154. After his quick public capitulation, Khrushchev sent a secret message to Kennedy trying to pocket the commitment to withdraw the Jupiters. Dobrynin tried to deliver the message to Robert Kennedy who, furious that Khrushchev had tried to reduce the offer

to a formal quid pro quo, threw the letter back at Dobrynin and literally refused to receive it. The letter was later recovered for scholars from Russian archives. See May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, pp. 663–64 and nn. 1,2.

130. McNamara testimony to the House Armed Services Committee, 12 January 1963, in files of the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

3

Model II: Organizational Behavior

For some purposes, governmental behavior can usefully be summarized as action chosen by a unitary, rational decision maker: centrally controlled, completely informed, and value maximizing. But a government is not an individual. It is not just the president and his entourage, nor even just the presidency and Congress. It is a vast conglomerate of loosely allied organizations, each with a substantial life of its own. Government leaders sit formally on top of this conglomerate. But governments perceive problems through organizational sensors. Governments define alternatives and estimate consequences as their component organizations process information; governments act as these organizations enact routines. Governmental behavior can therefore be understood, according to a second conceptual model, less as deliberate choices and more as *outputs* of large organizations functioning according to standard patterns of behavior.

To be responsive to a wide spectrum of problems, governments consist of large organizations, among which primary responsibility for particular tasks is divided. Each organization attends to a special set of problems and acts in quasi-independence on these problems. But few important issues fall exclusively within the domain of a single organization. Thus, government behavior relevant to any important problem reflects the independent output of several organizations, partially coordinated by government leaders. Government leaders can substantially disturb, but rarely precisely control, the specific behavior of these organizations.

To perform complex tasks, the behavior of large numbers of individuals must be coordinated. Coordination requires standard operating procedures: rules according to which things are done. Reliable performance of action that depends upon the behavior of hundreds of persons requires established “programs.” Indeed, if the eleven members of a football team are to perform adequately on any particular down, each player must not “do what he thinks needs to be done” or “do what the quarterback tells him to do.” Rather, each player must